

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Editorial Note: This is the inaugural issue of the Korea Platform, an independent and non-partisan platform for informed voices on policy issues related to the United States and the Republic of Korea. I hope you enjoy the Platform and encourage you to contribute to the discussion.

Dr. Victor D. Cha, CSIS Korea Chair

North Korea's Hard-Line Behavior: Background & Response

By The Honorable Han Sung-Joo, former foreign minister of the Republic of Korea

North Korean Goals

Currently, there are two leading interpretations of what North Korea's recent aggressive behavior indicates. One analysis argues that North Korea's hard-line behavior is an external manifestation of North Korea's internal situation, including Chairman Kim Jong-Il's health problems and questions of his succession. The second analysis holds that North Korea is trying to exert increased pressure on the Obama administration. I believe neither interpretation is necessarily correct, and moreover, that this specific debate is somewhat irrelevant.

The main argument behind the 'internal situation' camp (with proponents in both South Korea and the United States) is that North Korea is trying to bolster its power for the regime's leadership succession process, but at the same time it also wants to remind the United States of its existence. While that aspect has certainly played a part in North Korea's recent provocative moves, I believe its influence should not be overstated. In my view, North Korea had already made the decision to turn its nuclear and missile technological capabilities into full-fledged weapon systems prior to the recent provocative behavior. Rather than speculating about what other objectives North Korea is trying to achieve with its recent nuclear test, we should instead look for indicators that the government is taking steps to finish what it had already started out to do.

For a two year period, starting with the conclusion of the February 13 agreement in 2007, North Korea had frozen its nuclear facilities and continued to

engage in discussions about disablement. It could be said that this phase was more or less a retreat. However, at some point, North Korea seems to have decided to start producing nuclear materials and building nuclear facilities again, and decided to turn their nuclear and missile programs into a full-blown reality. This decision began to materialize beginning with North Korea's rejection of the verification protocol last December followed by its long-range rocket launch and its second nuclear test.

It is likely that Pyongyang fully anticipated the U.N.'s reaction to the recent missile tests. North Korea had almost certainly formulated a plan to use the U.N.'s reaction as an excuse to revive its nuclear activities. Because the first nuclear test in 2006 turned out to be either a failure or only a partial success, North Korea decided that it needed to carry out additional nuclear tests to supplement the first. A country like North Korea would need at least six to twelve months to make the necessary preparations to conduct a nuclear test. This is why it is difficult to see a direct connection with the advent of the Obama administration and Chairman Kim Jong-Il's health problems. It is likely that the North Koreans already had their own goals and schedule for perfecting their nuclear and missile technical capabilities.

From a military perspective, it seems that North Korea wants to develop the capability to deal a direct blow to the United States. It appears that by weaponizing its warheads and possessing the ability to fire a missile directly over U.S. territory, North Korea is aiming to become a nuclear threat vis-à-vis the United States. By perfecting its nuclear weapons systems, North Korea hopes to strengthen its bargaining position. North Korea thinks this will not only help it earn recognition as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state but it will also turn the negotiations on denuclearization into arms control negotiations.

Further supporting the view that North Korea wishes to embark on a full-scale nuclear weapons development program is North Korea's acknowledgement of its HEU program. North Korea is endowed with abundant natural uranium resources and is in a good position to use enriched uranium for developing nuclear weapons. North Korea's objective seems to be as follows: it no longer wants to handle the burden of concealing its HEU program, it wants to demonstrate its defiance of the UN Security Council's decision to impose sanctions, and it wants to speed up the pace of its nuclear weapons program development.

From a diplomatic perspective, it is likely North Korea still wants to make a "grand bargain." The term "grand bargain" is something North Korea mentioned to the United States before it launched its long-range missile. It expressed its willingness to negotiate with the United States through the Americans who visited North Korea this year. North Korea apparently wants to establish a qualitatively different relationship with the United States. In other words, it wants to exclude

South Korea, maintain smooth relations with China, and engage in bilateral negotiations with the United States on an equal footing basis. While giving the impression that there could be a dramatic breakthrough, North Korea's intentions appear to stem from the desire to induce a large diplomatic deal.

Yet, even if the negotiations were to take place, North Korea does not want the talks to end up emulating the Libyan model of "reciprocal unilateral measures." Instead, it will resort to so-called "salami tactics" which consist of slicing up bargaining trade-offs into even thinner slices to gain as many concessions as possible and to drag out the negotiations until its *de facto* nuclear status becomes recognized. In the negotiation process, North Korea strives to backload the required (reciprocal) actions so it can exchange smaller bargaining tradeoffs for larger concessions early on and postpone taking care of the bigger tradeoff pieces until much later. North Korea will most likely adopt a very long-term time frame. In order to do this, it is important for North Korea to increase the amount of bargaining chips it has by making its nuclear weapons much stronger and turning its missiles into ICBMs.

Interpreting North Korean actions is a difficult task. When North Korea takes strong action, they specifically calculate the impact of every single word in their statements or explanations. North Korea's recent statements directly relate to the actions they will take in the coming months and they build on the other statements made in the past. In the case of South Korea, domestic public opinion and ever-changing political circumstances must be taken into account. Thus, it is difficult for South Korea to act systematically and according to a strategic plan, as is the case in North Korea.

In the recently released North Korean statement pertaining to the armistice agreement, the invalidation of the agreement is dependent on several conditions. The statement cannot be regarded as an actual invalidation of the armistice agreement. North Korea mentioned the use of force in relation to South Korea's participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and specifically stated that "North Korea will respond with military force if any little hostile actions are taken against our vessels." The key condition here is that they will use force only when their ships are searched. However, there is a relatively slim possibility that such situations will occur, since PSI is not applicable to merchant ships making normal voyages. Additionally, if such a situation does arise, it may differ depending on how the circumstances are interpreted.

UN Sanctions

The UN Security Council resolution 1874 marks the most potent set of sanctions I have seen under Chapter VII, short of invoking Article 42, which authorizes the use of force. Although I tend to agree with the notion that these measures cannot make North Korea give up its planned strategies, the decision to adopt the resolution led to some meaningful results.

First, it resulted in giving China a large amount of leverage. Although South Korea, the United States, and Japan pushed for the adoption of a strong resolution, they decided to tone it down slightly, taking China's views into consideration. The best example is the section where the search parties have to obtain the approval of the vessel's flag state in order to search suspect North Korean cargo on the high seas. China could use this for face-saving purposes vis-à-vis North Korea. Even if the U.N. decides to impose sanctions on North Korea, whether the sanctions will actually be implemented effectively depends on China. China's influence over North Korea would increase if it actually decided to use sanctions as a weapon. In other words, the sanctions issue may empower China to put significant pressure on North Korea. China could threaten North Korea by firmly stating that if it agrees to cooperate, then the U.N. will not apply a strict set of sanctions; but if North Korea fails to cooperate, then the U.N. will be forced to apply sanctions as planned.

Second, the United States, South Korea, and Japan are looking to impose additional sanctions on top of what has already been listed in the U.N. Security Council resolution. The significance of the U.N. Security Council resolution is that it gives weight to such sanction measures. It facilitates the significant restriction of North Korea's trade and economic activities, weapons development and exports. The U.N. resolution may not be able to play a decisive role in helping to end North Korea's nuclear and missile development program, but it would make Pyongyang see that it will have an actual price to pay for its hard-line behavior. Among the additional sanction measures, the U.S. is considering applying serious financial sanctions to punish North Korea. Even while suggesting that the U.S. would engage in a bilateral dialogue with North Korea, the United States still harbors the view that North Korea's uranium enrichment program (UEP) and its counterfeiting activities are very serious problems. This view has been shared amongst the Obama administration in Washington. It is true that after the BDA case, North Korea tried to make alternative provisions by changing its style of operation for international financial activities by using bank diversification methods rather than concentrating its financial activities in only one bank. Nonetheless, the United States could still deal a blow to North Korea's international financial activities.

The South Korean Response

South Korea is perhaps prevented from adopting one overarching strategy to respond to North Korea by several distinct objectives and the difficulty of achieving all at once. Possessing a strategy means considering the bigger picture, having consistency, and keeping in mind a long-term time frame. Short-term measures should be linked with long-term objectives, and a response to one event should be connected with responses to other events. Of course, there should be some flexibility to change what needs to be changed in the specific step-by-step method that is being used; but the process of establishing a goal and designating a set of priorities is a necessity.

The problem lies with the fact that often a country's goals tend to contradict one another. For example, China wants to achieve a denuclearized North Korea but it also wants to maintain the North Korean regime and to manage the situation on the Korean peninsula so that there will be no military clashes. But in order to encourage North Korea give up its nuclear weapons, it has to increase the level of pressure. But strong pressure could in turn lead to the demise of the North Korean regime. Thus, if China wants to sustain the North Korean regime, it has no choice but to respond lightly to the nuclear problem.

The same goes for South Korea. South Korea's goals vis-à-vis North Korea are geared towards maintaining peace and managing stability in inter-Korean relations. The key is to find a solution that makes all of these goals less contradictory. Although maintaining peace may be the most important goal, if Korea were to focus solely on that one goal, North Korea might be led to believe that it can continue with its defiant behavior because of the perceived weakness of the South. On the other hand, if Korea were to focus mainly on the goal of denuclearization, tensions on the Korean peninsula could increase. In this regard, it is important to set one's priorities straight among the various strategic goals.

U.S. Involvement

The North Korean nuclear question is not just a South Korean problem. Therefore, South Korea alone cannot come up with a strategy to deal with the problem. The United States and China, Korea and the United States, and Korea and China need to be engaged in strategic dialogues with each other to discuss the future of Northeast Asia. The door should also be opened to Japan and Russia. It is most likely that these strategic-dialogue partners will be able to agree on the common goals of maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula and the denuclearization of North Korea. Within that context, these partners must decide on the most appropriate response methods and must determine a rational order of priorities. Now that North Korea's nuclear strategy has become relatively more

obvious, the dialogue partners will also need to consult each other and figure out what the most effective response would be.

In particular, the interested parties should not resort to policy initiatives that resemble CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement) in one sweep. The United States, during the early stages of the Bush administration, went in that direction but failed to fully implement it and wound up giving North Korea time to complete its nuclear and missile program. It is time to admit that, for now, there is no option but to manage the present situation to prevent the nuclear issue from taking a turn for the worse, while still aiming to first freeze North Korea's nuclear program. Then, if possible, there should be movement towards the next stage of disabling the facilities. From a long-term perspective, CVID cannot be abandoned but it should be pursued with great patience, taking into consideration the time factor and all the relevant details of the evolving situation. I believe that the various dialogue partners will be able to reach an agreement on these goals. Based on the agreement, they will need to draw a road map for resolving the North Korean nuclear question.

Some conclude that the US might only be satisfied with preventing the transfer of North Korean nuclear technology and materials to other countries, as the US does not feel immediately threatened by a North Korean attack. However, president Obama stressed several times during his presidential campaign that he would prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons using all possible means. Moreover, regarding the recent situation with North Korea and its link to Iran, the US cannot give tacit approval of North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, as it did in the cases of India and Pakistan. Simply put, if the U.S. can't stop North Korea, it will be even more difficult to stop Iran. Rather it is the US that seems to question whether South Korea is losing sensitivity towards the prospect of North Korea becoming a nuclear power. Such a perception gap could cause increasing conflict between the two countries. However, during the past few months South Korea and the US have been cooperating closely and this cooperation will continue.

Currently North Korea is making it very difficult to make any progress. The Obama administration is still reviewing North Korean policy and its nuclear policy. South Korea should continue to engage in discussions and to cooperate with the U.S., but this is a relatively good time for South Korea to make its voice heard as the new administration is reviewing its policies. In order to do so, South Korea must strategically organize its thoughts. Instead of trying to persuade the U.S. after it has already decided what best suits Korea, it is better to discuss and organize ideas and strategies with the U.S., China and other countries first.

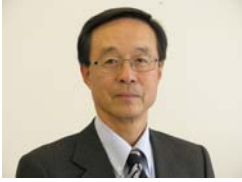
Comparing the 1994 Crisis to Today

I have worked in the government twice. The meetings with the U.S. during the 1990's were like brainstorming sessions, with flowing discussions on the question of how to solve pending issues. During the first six years of this decade, both countries had their own positions and the negotiations could be characterized as talks where both parties were trying to persuade the other to compromise, with each side discussing who would make concessions and who would get what kind of trade-offs.

The discussions during the 1990's were also different from today's as the views of both sides were much more aligned, and both governments had more open attitudes. However, during the early part of this decade, the Bush administration tended to stick to a hard-line stance while the Roh Moo-Hyun administration did the opposite. I often attempted to narrow this gap, but found the experience during the Bush administration much more difficult. Because of the unique North-South relationship, when South Korea proceeds with hard-line policies and the US is more flexible, it is relatively easy to manage North Korea related issues. However, when South Korea takes a more moderate position and the US supports a hard-line stance, the Korean people readily accuse the US of interfering in the North-South relationship. This sort of problem occurs because the R.O.K.-U.S. alliance is centered on the North Korean threat but at the same time North Korea still remains a part of Korea. Thus, it appears more difficult to harmonize the views of the U.S. and South Korea when North-South relations are in better shape than North Korea-U.S. relations.

Conclusion: Déjà vu All Over Again

I have witnessed a significant degree of fatigue over managing the North Korea problem. This is true within the government and among the Korean citizenry. Clearly, dealing with the same type of incidents over and over again creates a lot of fatigue; similar to experiencing an unpleasant déjà vu. However, the nuclear issue is such a critical issue that we cannot be complacent and let it get any worse. In 1993 when North Korea withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) it disturbed the world a great deal. North Korea has now conducted two nuclear tests and is threatening to launch even more ICBMs, yet the KOSDAQ stock market prices have not even budged. While rapidly falling stock prices would definitely be a serious problem, being too detached from the issue can be also a matter of concern. We should maintain our keen interest in this issue no matter how exhausted we are.



About the Author: Han Sung-Joo served as foreign minister of the Republic of Korea (1993-1994) and as Ambassador to the United States (2003-2005). He was also the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Cyprus (1996-97), a member of the UN Inquiry Commission on the 1994 Rwanda Genocide (1999), and Chairman of the East Asia Vision Group (2000-2001). He is currently the Chairman of the International Policy Studies Institute of Korea and Professor Emeritus at Korea University. He also serves as the Chairman of the President's Advisory Council on Foreign Policy and Security.

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