

A New North Korean Policy under the Obama Administration

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Abstract

For over half a century, the Korean Peninsula has posed a foreign-policy dilemma for every American president. During this time, continuity, rather than change, has been the prevailing characteristic of U.S. foreign policy. The recent Bush administration, in relation to its policy towards North Korea, was characterized by its dualism — believing in the same goal, but divided over goal achievement actions. Unfortunately, the internal division of policy at home has resulted in the North Korean nuclear issue being in a worse shape today than it was eight years ago after the Clinton–Bush regime change. After President Bush refused to follow Clinton’s engagement path, North Korea significantly increased its plutonium stockpile, tested nuclear bombs and announced itself a “nuclear weapons state.” President Barack Obama has inherited difficult issues and initiatives not only on the home front but also internationally. The new Obama administration is inundated with a plethora of policy issues ranging from economics to foreign policy. In the past few years, many experts in North Korean policy have juxtaposed various strategies that have been used and should be included with relation to North Korea. This paper will underline motives for North Korea’s actions, updates of previously communicated policy options with real-time information, and offer a unique twist, with truths that are often overlooked, on how they should be implemented in the new Obama era, moving forward.

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Introduction

For over half a century, the Korean Peninsula has posed a foreign-policy dilemma for every American president. During this time, continuity, rather than change, has been the prevailing characteristic of U.S. foreign policy. Since President Reagan's "Modest Initiative" in 1988, the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) have attempted to normalize their relations through dialogue and negotiations.¹ In 1994, North Korea and the United States signed an agreement by which Pyongyang pledged to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons program. In return, the United States pledged to provide a package of nuclear, energy, economic, and diplomatic benefits. The U.S. support of the Agreed Framework has been inconsistent. Since then North Korea has launched several rockets and missiles, and has increased its nuclear weapon arsenal. In recent years six-party talks have been used as a vehicle for change in regard to the North Korean nuclear issue. The major players—China, South Korea, Japan, Russia and the United States—have worked to collectively implement their national initiative with regard to North Korea. The result has been that these negotiations have yet to result in a concrete solution and direction for forward progression and movement. These sessions of dialogue and negotiations have proceeded without altering the underlying configuration of the United States and North Korea's Cold War postures towards each other, such as armed deterrence. Nonetheless, the persistent duality of diplomacy exercised by U.S. leaders has largely contributed to the inability to resolve their differences. The recent Bush administration, in relation to its policy towards North Korea, has been characterized by its dualism — believing in the same goal, but divided over goal achievement actions. These divisions took place within the administration, which consisted of an influential coalition of Pentagon officials and advisers, among them Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, officials of Vice President Dick Cheney's office, and proliferation experts in the State Department and White House led by Undersecretary of State John Bolton.²

Unfortunately, the internal division of policy at home has resulted in the North Korean nuclear issue being in a worse shape today than it was eight years ago after the Clinton-Bush regime change. After President Bush refused to follow Clinton's engagement path, North Korea significantly increased its plutonium stockpile, tested nuclear bombs and announced itself a "nuclear weapons state." With his election as president, Barack Obama inherited not only difficult issues and initiatives on the home front but also internationally. The new Obama administration is inundated with a plethora of policy issues ranging from economics to foreign policy. President Obama has his hands full dealing with the current dismal economic situation at home and with equally important foreign policy issues, especially when it comes to North Korea.

Without UN involvement, the North Korean communists held their own elections in September 1948, and under the tutelage of Russia, Kim Il Sung established the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea.³ Thus, the 38th parallel became Korea's "Berlin Wall." Since then, the country has been a troubled issue for every American president. Since Obama took office, North Korea has attempted to make a statement to the new president through a series of missile tests. In the past few years, many experts in North Korean policy have juxtaposed various strategies that have been used and should be included with relation to North Korea. This paper will underline motives for North Korea's actions, updates of previously communicated policy options with real-time information and offer a unique twist, with truths that are often overlooked, on how they should be implemented in the new Obama era, moving forward.

North Korean Motivation

Since the early 1990s, North Korea has dealt with a harsh economic and food crisis that has left the country desperate to earn hard currency. Desperate times often call for desperate measures, and North Korea is using provocative acts to obtain some kind of negotiating leverage in spite of its weak economic condition — an attempt to accumulate enough bargaining chips to get the best deal from the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other U.S. allies.⁴ Before the 1990s, North Korea shifted back and forth, oftentimes going back on international agreements, continuing with nuclear development and testing. However, after a 1998 launch, North Korea insisted that its only goal was to loft into orbit a satellite. In recent years, some pundits have said that North Korea's aggressiveness is an attempt to punish the conservative South Korean government for jettisoning the "sunshine policy" of its predecessors and making further economic aid conditional on North Korean reform. Others see it as a test of the new Obama administration, and still others conclude that it is a reflection of a power struggle in the North — or that it's a test drive for potential buyers like Iran, Syria and Libya, countries that are known to be involved with nuclear engineering and activity.⁵ Yet in reality, North Korea seeks assurances and validation for the United States and long-term aid from both the United States and Japan — frankly, North Korea wants to be accepted as a legitimate country. The "pushing the envelope" approach in its diplomatic moves and threatening gestures is just a way of drawing attention to a country that would have otherwise been overlooked. Since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, when North Korea lost most of its trade partners, the economically impoverished country has used threats as a survival tactic. North Korean spokespersons have suggested on many occasions that the DPRK would be willing to make major concessions, including giving up nuclear weapons, if the United States agreed to respect its sovereignty and provided other incentives— such as economic assistance.⁶ In a way, it seems like a "big brother, little brother" relationship — the little brother seeking validation and respect from the older brother, and recognition that he has indeed grown into a young man, capable of offering many things.

Policy Options

U.S. policy towards North Korea has not been consistent over the past fifty years and has not solidified any permanent change. The North Korea nuclear issue is in worse shape today and will be much more of a challenge to deal with than eight years ago when President George W. Bush took over from President Clinton. On April 5, 2009, in Prague, President Obama reiterated a campaign promise to hold talks with Russia to reduce both American and Russian nuclear stockpiles, to push for a nuclear test ban and to set up an international fuel bank to help with peaceful nuclear-energy programs. While he was giving the speech, North Korea, which has a long history of illegal testing, fired a test missile over Japan. Today all eyes are on President Obama — not only pertaining to domestic issues, but international issues also. Policy is the foundation; the blueprint for forward movement. Policy options that have been discussed, implemented, accepted and rejected over the years have both strengths and weaknesses in theory and in implementation. Yet, moving forward, it is important that policy decisions, though they are formulated based on the past, are implemented based on current real-time information and creative implementation.

Maintain the Status Quo

The Bush administration operated through the six-party process to ensure dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. However, during the last eight years North Korean policy has been nothing but clear on paper and divisive in practice. North Korea's Central News Agency (KCNA), reported that "the U.S. is double-tongued and applies double standards" on nuclear issues; was "loud-mouthed" in seeking a world free of nuclear weapons; and was guilty of "sheer hypocrisy."⁷ Thus, America is currently in a position not only to change policy but to change practice. Some theorists believe that President Obama, like President Bush, fails to realize that Kim Jong-il leads a band of thugs who negotiate by bullying. Furthermore, many realists believe that it is naïve to think that North Korea will give up its nuclear arms and missiles. With a decrepit economy and lack of international leverage, the idea of ceding nuclear activity is only a dream. Maintaining the status quo in regard to North Korean policy does not necessarily mean not changing policy, but it is not changing the common beliefs of past diplomats that North Korea will give up its nuclear activity and embrace a more diplomatic negotiation strategy. However, it seems that if a country has been doing things one way for so many years, what incentive is there to change?

Accept North Korea as a Nuclear Power

Some analysts suggest that North Korea, as a paranoid and isolated regime, will never be willing to give up its nuclear weapons. Furthermore, some security analysts argue that accepting North Korea as a "responsible" nuclear power may be in the best interest of the international community. This move could initiate a new win-win non-proliferation commitment on the international scale that could be mutually beneficial

to all parties—a commitment that could mean increased international safety for the world and increased economic assistance for North Korea.⁸ Yet assuming that such a declaration would result in better behavior from North Korea is a little farfetched. For North Korea to be accepted globally as a legitimate nuclear power, a great level of responsibility must be proven through consistent action on their part — action that from past and recent events it is unrealistic to anticipate.

Bilateral Talks with North Korea

North Korea has had a longstanding request for direct bilateral relations with the United States. Many pro-engagement advocates suggest embracing this request and offering greater incentives and reciprocity for a nuclear settlement. The bilateral relationship could be in the form of a grand bargain wherein the United States normalizes political relations with North Korea and welcomes the “Hermit Kingdom” into the community of nations and, in exchange, North Korea rids itself of nuclear weapons.⁹

President Obama is expected to be more flexible, emphasizing direct talks and high level exchanges to culminate in a summit, perhaps reordering the sequence of steps to a peace agreement and normalization during the process of a complete and verifiable denuclearization. The administration is also expected to produce a coherent consensual policy from within and in the spirit of bipartisan foreign policy. It should be expected that North Korea will suspend all nuclear and missile tests and freeze its plutonium stockpile as an initial step towards normalizing the relations between the two countries. However, taking into consideration human rights and other sensitive issues for the North Koreans, the Obama administration can launch a quiet diplomacy to convey U.S. concerns, which do not intend to undermine the DPRK regime. A bilateral relationship between the United States and North Korea should build mutual trust between the countries and induce North Korea to transform its policies and to reform its system by itself. Some optimistic analysts would suggest that North Korea is ready for a major reform for economic efficiency but not for opening because of its fear of losing internal control. Direct talks are one of the best ways to build mutual confidence.¹⁰ Normalizing the progress through a bilateral U.S.–North Korea relationship could also lay the foundation for further initiatives that also threaten international security (e.g., ending the production of fissile material for military uses). Nonetheless, without a mutual agreement from both the United States and North Korea to embrace this diplomatic relationship with open arms and in pursuit of similar goals, the realization of a successful resolution will be greatly minimized.

Continue Diplomacy via Six-Party Talks

President Obama has indicated that he will continue to pursue denuclearization within the realm of the six-party talks together with China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan. Despite past and current North Korean relations, President Obama inherits the progress made through the multilateral talks in Beijing, namely the delayed Phase

II implementation of disablement. During the six-party talks in September 19, 2005, North Korea committed to a verifiable denuclearization, and this commitment can be the foundation for further negotiations by the Obama administration. Discussion and conclusions of a peace mechanism among the six countries can be realized during Phase III negotiation. There are multiple advantages to the six-party talks: recognition of China's role, the opportunity to cooperate on regional security issues, the multilateral nature of security assurance to the North, and the cost of sharing among the five participants, by which the U.S. in theory is responsible for only one fifth.

Some analysts believe that the only way we are going to get rid of the North Korean nuclear weapons program is at the negotiating table; however, the missile test on May 25, 2009, presents a challenge for President Obama since its launch occurred at a time when North Korea's relationship with Seoul and Tokyo was almost at rock bottom. President Obama must find a way to keep the United States and its allies on the same page as far as how to handle Pyongyang.¹¹ The talks are going to need an extraordinary amount of patience from all parties and a realization that these negotiations are going to take years. Every negotiation will lead to an additional negotiation. Through the resubmission of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty to the Senate for ratification and the jump-start to some long-stalled negotiations on a verifiable treaty to end the production of nuclear weapons, President Obama will not see success unless other countries change the way they deal and do business with North Korea.¹² It is important that the United States, China, South Korea and Japan collectively unite under a single goal in order to move forward with successful negotiations with North Korea.

Escalate Economic and Legal Pressure on Regime

Applying pressure on North Korea by targeting its source of power generation, financial initiatives, and strengthening security initiatives are more direct tangible actions for change. Since the early 1990s, North Korea has consistently struggled economically, and has requested and received assistance from the United States and neighboring nations in order to fulfill some of the most basic needs, such as feeding its people. A report by South Korea's Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security predicted that North Korea would face a critical point this year that would cause a radical change due to the deepening systemic instability in economic conditions. The report goes on to explain that the North Korean people's dependence upon and loyalty to the state and the leadership has decreased due to the regime's ruling ideology and the people's method of economic survival.¹³ Looming internal division between the state and its people offers an advantageous platform for external legal and economic pressures on North Korea to increase. The Bush administration developed several programs designed to increase pressure on the North Korean regime by targeting the influx of cash and goods to Pyongyang that allow the regime to hold on to power and develop weapons programs. The administration also applied pressure on the regime financially, identifying and pressuring several banks that serviced North Korea, which have since suspended their business with that nation. Next year's

Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference offers a chance to strengthen the anti-proliferation regime. The Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty in 1999 in a highly partisan vote, but President Obama said he will resubmit it for ratification. Unless the official nuclear powers take steps to uphold their side of the NPT bargain, which obliges them to work towards abolishing their nukes in exchange for keeping others from seeking the bomb, this opportunity could be lost. The treaty could unravel. China would probably ratify the ban if America did. But Pakistan won't accept a test ban unless India does (both, like Israel, are nuclear-armed but outside the NPT), and without them and belligerent North Korea the treaty cannot take full effect. The last effort to ban bomb-making was stymied by Iran and Pakistan; India officially supports this ban, knowing that others will do the blocking for it.¹⁴

On one hand, continuing this pressure tactic with support from other nations like China could force a definite change in behavior from the North Korean regime; however, pressuring North Korea too hard could also backfire by pushing it to proliferate weapons and nuclear material at an increased pace out of economic desperation. UN sanctions have been tried before, and failed, producing little change in North Korea's behavior. This partly has to do with states, including Russia and China, that continue to do business in luxury items with North Korea by finding loopholes in UN sanctions. Yet with the launch of the nuclear test missile, President Obama may have a great opportunity of getting other key states to cooperate and support new restrictions that could essentially hurt Pyongyang.¹⁵ Some analysts agree that a treaty-backed ban on testing is in America's best interests with the full cooperation of all anti-proliferation parties involved.

Adoption of Regime Change Policy by Non-Military Means

The United States could adopt an official policy of regime change in North Korea that would mean abandoning the six-party talks to actively pursue undermining the North Korean ruling government directly or through the collapse of the North Korean economy. As stated above, North Korea is already experiencing internal pressure from its people due to the poor economic conditions that have been prevalent since the early 1990s. Through nonmilitary, direct or indirect actions the United States could create large divisions within North Korea that could ultimately cause the country to collapse from within. In its present economic condition, the United States alone would not be able to make this happen; however, if China and South Korea joined forces and agreed to cut their aid and economic assistance lifeline to North Korea, this option could result in North Korea relinquishing its nuclear weapons.

North Korea is critically dependent on outsiders for oil, food and essential medicines. In the past no one has considered the last two, but China has stopped oil deliveries before, and when it did, Pyongyang quickly returned to the bargaining table. However, abandoning the six-party talks and taking on a selective multilateral initiative could result in more international dissension than support. Hurting relationships with other countries can produce massive ramifications, perhaps negatively

affecting the already struggling global economy. Allies could easily become enemies, and increased global divisions could lead to greater international unrest. Old enemies could easily become new friends, and the intensive pressure could strengthen the leverage North Korea has been attempting to obtain by proliferating nuclear weapons and technology to willing buyers, including terrorist groups that may be targeting the U.S. or U.S. interests.¹⁶

Limited Withdrawal

For North Korea to feel safe giving up its missile development program, the United States must work with the other countries in the region to reduce militaries and strengthen confidence-building measures. The United States is by far the dominant military presence in the region, with 100,000 troops and billions of dollars' worth of sophisticated weaponry. Therefore it must take the first steps toward demilitarization, including canceling plans for a missile defense system and withdrawing troops from South Korea. By doing this the United States would forfeit its position as the leader in the non-proliferation initiative to the regional powers. China would more than likely take the lead.¹⁷ Nonetheless, to take this approach would mean that the United States would no longer have a say in how North Korean relations are handled, and would have to accept the direction and the approach that the new powers chose to pursue.

Conclusion

In the wake of past and present events, North Korea proves to be a country in need of attention and validation. The persistent rejection of global civility is characterized by repeated defiance and disrespect of international statutes and sanctions. In spite of the great challenge he has before him, President Obama has the opportunity to take action that could possibly change the way we see the world and spur forward progress. By infusing the idealism of diplomats of past with the realism of the present, President Obama can do more to create a safer world. His vision is authentic, and provokes people to break away from the old way of doing things and take an imaginative approach in how to move forward. He is already committed to using the goal of zero nuclear weapons globally to shape his future plans. It is a challenging goal, but it also sets a standard and demands greatness, not only from the people he has chosen to implement it, but also from the people who follow. This goal may be unrealistic in the greater scheme of things; but to come remotely close would be considered a great success. Policy options have been created, implemented, criticized and rejected, yet none have resulted in a lasting change. It is a time to try new things, to combine effort and ideas to find the most effective way to achieve the ultimate goal.

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