

# Failure to Relaunch?: The United States, Nuclear North Korea, and the Future of the Six-Party Talks

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## Abstract

During the past twenty years, Washington has oscillated between tentative engagement with Pyongyang under the Clinton administration and isolation and multilateralism under the Bush administration. With the Obama administration almost nearing its four-year tenure, the Six-Party Talks have stalled and North Korea's multiple attacks on the South in 2010 have created new instabilities. Why so little results despite promises of a radical departure away from the Axis of Evil rhetoric and hard-line politics? This paper suggests that the Obama administration has utilized approaches that no longer fit current circumstances and hence failed to create an original, coherent and effective foreign policy.

Keywords: United States, North Korea, nuclear weapons,  
Six-Party Talks, foreign policy

## Introducing Change: The Obama Conundrum

When President Obama took office in early 2009, a wave of relief was felt among Korean Peninsula observers, with hopes that dialogue would start to flow once again between the United States and North Korea. Both countries went through an initial

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period of engagement willed by the Clinton administration before moving on to a more complex relationship under the Bush administration. Eventually, the nuclear negotiation dialogue was crystallized through the Six-Party Talks format in 2003. Though major American involvements in the Middle East meant that Washington had very little time and resources to allocate to the North Korean issue, two important milestones were achieved under George W. Bush: the September 19, 2005, Agreement paved the way for parties to proceed to the denuclearization of North Korea, and the February 13, 2007, Joint Statement presented a practical plan of action for the dismantlement of the Yongbyon reactor facility.

Barack Obama included in his presidential campaign promises of holding direct talks with North Korean leaders within his first year in office. This inevitably raised hopes that a denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula could be achieved, especially in light of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's ill-health potentially resulting in a loss of power. The Six-Party Talks process, however, has been frozen since Obama assumed office in 2009. Why such a stalemate? Has the Obama administration failed to create a coherent foreign policy that would address North Korea's nuclear weapons program? The debate surrounding the Obama administration approach and track record when dealing with North Korea is understandably emerging and is as such relatively limited when attempting to provide robust correlations and conclusions. As such, the current article builds upon existing literatures that have been published at regular intervals in *North Korean Review* and that have chronicled the evolution of the United States' foreign policy toward North Korea. This strand of intellectual inquiry can be divided into three categories: early observations of the Obama administration and the outlining of new strategies aimed at resurrecting the U.S.–North Korea dialogue, game-theoretical and content-rich approaches analyzing half-term Obama strategies, and a more pragmatic and critical literature questioning Obama's choices and formulating new hypotheses for a radical change of policy.

Cooper takes a resolutely hopeful tone when considering, in fall 2009, what options were available to the Obama administration in order to engage North Korea, stressing that “by infusing the idealism of diplomats of past with the realism of the present, President Obama can do more to create a safer world.”<sup>1</sup> While Cooper's views are largely representative of the general sentiment that echoed throughout Barack Obama's presidential victory and general message of change, the argument is clearly focused on how to achieve complete denuclearization (this clarity of purpose is commendable, but it also raises the question of whether any result achieved, but falling short of zero nuclear weapons, would be considered a failure as well), and especially stresses that pursuing new and creative diplomatic overtures would be essential in achieving such goal, a fact that now resonates as bittersweet given the subsequent lack of original policies in 2010 and 2011.

Riding on early optimistic outlooks, Lee stressed in spring 2010 the need for the Obama administration to concentrate on removing sanctions and make the unprecedented move of accepting North Korea as a “normal” state, a general foreign policy that he dubs “smart diplomacy.”<sup>2</sup> Presenting a simple but efficient matrix based on hard-line and soft-line policies chosen by both the United States and North Korea,

Lee suggests that the current situation might be his worst-case scenario, that is to say a time of conflict in which inflexibility on both sides lead to a diplomatic impasse. One of the most important questions stemming from this work, however, is, How it is possible for both countries to move from one type of relationship into the next (for example, what stages are needed to de-escalate from a “conflict” situation to a “communication” situation, and whether it is also possible to find a Nash type of equilibrium within the model). In order to do so, it also appears necessary to consider content-rich analysis that will provide a detailed narrative of existing policies.

Hong Nac Kim’s article considers similar issues to that of Lee, but presents an inclusive analysis of Barack Obama’s first year in power.<sup>3</sup> While it is somewhat implicit that a complete eradication of North Korea’s nuclear program is impossible, pursuing a policy of engaging North Korea through bilateral or multilateral talks is perceived as a better alternative to complete isolation, but Kim is guarded when it comes to the Obama administration’s efforts to create a grand strategy that would link various issues in the hope to settle, once and for all, the question of North Korea’s dangerous behavior. As 2010 unfolded, it became, however, quite obvious that the Obama administration was reluctant to engage North Korea directly, thus leading to questions regarding how a dialogue could be started between the two parties when one was unwilling to address the other.

In a bid to center the debate back on its two main protagonists, Inchul Kim aimed at considering new avenues in order to improve the negotiation relationship between Washington and Pyongyang, as interactions between the two were largely nonexistent by fall 2010.<sup>4</sup> Using game theory to derive a sequential negotiation framework, thus addressing some of Lee’s earlier simultaneous model outcomes, Kim confirms that the United States’ sole goal is to denuclearize North Korea, while outlining a series of goals for North Korea, the most important of which appears to be nuclear recognition. If those goals are as mutually exclusive as they appear to be, can anything be achieved by the Obama administration?

In fall 2011, Pyon suggests that time is an important factor in this equation, and one that should be justly considered.<sup>5</sup> Calling the Obama administration’s North Korean policy “strategic patience,” that is to say a mix of waiting for North Korea to return to the negotiation table while at the same time staying rather inflexible when it comes to removing economic sanctions, Pyon is doubtful whether this approach is more likely to yield results than were past (proven) strategies of American engagement toward North Korea.

The recent U.S.–North Korea meeting held in Geneva in fall 2011 could perhaps be interpreted as the first success of the “strategic patience” approach. However, the absence of a recognizable consensus following the talks means that the strategy might be, in the end, misguided, and that a profound remolding of the Obama North Korea policy might need to be considered when assessing its current track record. Given the plethora of options, either tried or suggested, for Washington to craft a path toward easing tensions with Pyongyang, the current article suggests that Barack Obama has failed to create a coherent and original foreign policy when dealing with North Korea, largely because he originally presented himself as being the “anti-Bush”

during his presidential campaign. Indeed, Obama imprisoned himself in the rhetoric of open communication with rogue-state leaders only to backtrack a few months later, eventually creating a foreign policy that borrowed heavily from both the Clinton and the Bush administrations.

The policy that has resulted from this pick-and-mix approach is unclear and is articulated around an inflexibility to remove sanctions, a linking of issues that create a difficult negotiating environment, a usage of track-two diplomacy that has not been focused enough on interacting with Pyongyang directly and a constant use of rhetorical tactics aimed at urging North Korea to return to the talks, but without creating an environment that is likely to nurture such a return. This paper therefore aims to consider the question of how to engage North Korea before giving a thorough review of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations' approaches to a nuclear North Korea, in order to finally suggest practical policy options.

## Dealing with North Korea: A Balancing Act

Cooperation with North Korea is possible: there were successes in both the Clinton administration and the Bush administration. Indeed, Litwak contends that though the concept of "rogue states" was initially created by the Clinton administration, there is little evidence to suggest that the United States refused to deal with North Korea.<sup>6</sup> As such, the administration engaged North Korea repeatedly through an array of forums, discussions, and deals, hence creating a "North Korean Exception" akin to a government negotiating with hijackers despite proclaiming, "We do not negotiate with terrorists." The United States also sought to create practical implementation frameworks to assist in North Korea denuclearizing, with the concept of CVID (Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Dismantlement) of Pyongyang's nuclear programs and facilities quickly becoming a Bush administration leitmotiv. Such an emphasis on a cooperative program of denuclearization bolstered by several step-by-step approaches, verification mechanisms and rewards is therefore largely different from "noncooperative" disarmament techniques used by the United States during the First Gulf War, for example.<sup>7</sup>

The United States has also successfully engaged North Korea in partnership with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) within the aid sector. Indeed, Gordon Flake suggests that NGO engagement in North Korea during the Clinton administration (and also largely supported, in many cases, by the president and his cabinet) created fundamental changes in the way the United States interacted with North Korea. Indeed, it made Pyongyang dependent on foreign aid, thus slowly curbing North Korea's most aggressive behaviors in exchange for the promise of aid.<sup>8</sup> Though cooperation and engagement should be noted, the United States has also oscillated between being complacent and realistic about the true nature of the North Korean regime. On the one hand, critics argue that even though Kim Dae-jung, Vladimir Putin and Madeleine Albright labeled their North Korean counterparts rational and in some cases even clever and charming, it would be almost criminal to ignore the vile nature

of the Pyongyang leadership and especially its human rights records and crimes.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Washington's intransigence in asking Pyongyang to take the first steps toward dismantlement before receiving any reward has alienated Pyongyang from negotiations at times.<sup>10</sup> On these bases, many have attempted to prescribe what policies should be enacted by Washington when dealing with a nuclear North Korea.

During the Clinton administration, Michael Klare advocated for engaging North Korea as it was thought that containing or isolating such dangerous states would most likely only increase their resolve against the international community.<sup>11</sup> Martin presented similar arguments for the Bush administration, focusing on the need for the United States to create a coherent approach to the question of North Korean nuclear weapons instead of seeking a comprehensive package deal designed to settle many issues (economic sanctions, missile launch, attacks on South Korea and finding a resolution to the Korean conflict) at once.<sup>12</sup> The United States also often fares better when being more flexible in dealing with other countries. As such, establishing trust as well as confidence with Pyongyang, showing willing steps such as refraining from asking for preconditions, or agreeing to remove economic sanctions could all be sensible policy options for Washington.<sup>13</sup>

Some observers go further and urge the United States to let go of the past and to propose new rounds of talks that do not revisit the previous deeds and misgivings of both sides. Thus, the Obama administration should be striving to offer simultaneous solutions to North Korea instead of the traditional sequential approaches that have not proven very successful in the past.<sup>14</sup> Negotiation strategies are, however, not the only policy options advocated. Indeed, some still support a more muscular approach toward North Korea. By the end of the Clinton administration, for example, Henriksen supported the idea that international law as well as international institutions mattered when dealing with North Korea, but agreed that the threat of a potential military intervention should also be an important component of any American foreign policy toward Pyongyang.<sup>15</sup> Studying negotiation patterns with North Korea, Downs also advocated a mix of diplomatic initiatives that would require the use of military power, thus calling for a "stick and stick" approach instead of a "carrot and stick" one.<sup>16</sup>

Despite those more hard-line approaches, there is also a general agreement in the literature that not attacking Pyongyang is by far the best course of action for the United States. Indeed, Holmes suggests that Washington does not have, overall, a very good track record when it comes to trying to solve problems by using limited war or coercive diplomatic tactics.<sup>17</sup>

## The Clinton Years: Tentative Cooperation

The Clinton administration was the first U.S. administration to engage North Korea directly. Strategies on how to deal with Pyongyang were quite varied, and it took most of Clinton's first term in office to find a balance in his relationship with North Korea, and to create reciprocal patterns of cooperation with Pyongyang being

compensated and rewarded for engaging in the negotiation process. Clinton's second term furthered this cooperation through direct diplomatic opportunities, such as the U.S. Defense Secretary visiting Pyongyang, as well as through more encompassing discussions on military issues.

The Clinton years, however, were constantly marred by the dilemma of whether North Korea should be engaged or contained. Incidentally, the growing concern that North Korea was refueling its nuclear reactors with a mind to eventually develop nuclear weapons led to attempts to engage rather than isolate. As such, the creation of a framework that would allow for North Korea to receive new reactors from the international community, hence giving Pyongyang access to needed energy in a controlled manner, was of prime importance to the Clinton administration.

The 1994 Agreed Framework was the first example of creating confidence-building measures between North Korea and several other countries in an attempt to reduce tensions, provide a sense of security, and at the same time move toward a peaceful resolution of the Korean conflict; but the signing of the Agreed Framework was far from being a given for Kim Il-sung. He was hesitant about sealing a deal but still interested in negotiating with the United States. His passing on July 8, 1994, marked the end to his five decades in power, and there were many uncertainties regarding whether his son Kim Jong-il would become the de facto new leader and, more importantly, whether he would be able to establish himself as North Korea's legitimate ruler in the long run. Incidentally, Kim Il-sung's passing also put on hold any talks of the Agreed Framework. The agreement was finally signed on October 21, 1994, thanks to the efforts of former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, who practiced Track-Two diplomacy without informing the Clinton administration. The Agreed Framework created incentives and step-by-step approaches for North Korea to gradually eliminate its conventional nuclear energy, while receiving oil shipments as well as two light-water reactors as replacements for the power loss.

While strategizing about North Korea's new energy development, the United States also tackled a number of issues from the past that it had been unable to discuss with North Korea until then because of the lack of any proper channels of discussion. This was largely due to the fact that North Korea was not recognized by the United States, and that any direct talks would have also undermined American efforts to help protect, stabilize and develop South Korea. Alongside confidence-building measures and the road map created by the Agreed Framework, the United States tried to engage North Korea in a dialogue regarding its potential missile proliferation and testing, also revisiting some painful issues from the Korean War with the question of recovering U.S. soldiers' remains, for which Washington paid a hefty \$2 million. Promising talks on missile proliferation were also held in Berlin but were quickly followed by the United States imposing economic sanctions on the North after it became known that Pyongyang had colluded with Iran on missile technology transfer. Despite those economic sanctions, Pyongyang appeared to remain committed to testing its missiles and kept on making preparations for an eventual launch, and it took several rounds of meetings with North Korea in New York for the U.S. Department of State to eventually confirm that the tests had been scrapped.



As President Clinton moved into his second term in office, South Korean president Kim Dae-jung took control of Seoul, and announced at his inaugural speech on February 25, 1998, the broad lines of his revolutionary Sunshine Policy, which was aimed at jump-starting reconciliation between the two Koreas. The United States supported the Sunshine Policy, as it was becoming obvious that North Korea was under severe strain because of floods and droughts in the late 1990s. The general idea was that a hard collapse of North Korean society should be avoided at all costs, thus suggesting that a soft landing (gradual) collapse of North Korea would be a more suitable option for the South to absorb the North, and stability on the peninsula to be reached. Even though the United States was committed to the policy, it was also pursuing its own stick diplomacy, especially when it came to North Korean missile technology, and Washington had to impose a new round of sanctions on the North when it was discovered that some technology had been transferred from North Korea to Pakistan. Repeated calls by North Korea to secure financial compensation for the loss of revenue coming from its missile technology were left unanswered, and the United States stuck with its position of asking Pyongyang to end its missile program, especially after North Korea successfully launched its Taepodong missile into the Pacific Ocean over Japan in August 1998.

In the late 1990s, Pyongyang focused on trying to settle security guarantees, food, and financial compensation from the international community and especially from the United States, thus trying to alleviate ripple effects from a desperate domestic economic situation. Success was achieved when the United States asked for access to the Kumchang-ri site as Washington suspected North Korea of developing secret underground nuclear facilities, thus being potentially in breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework. After months of back-and-forth talks, inspectors were finally allowed to the site — a big empty hole — in exchange for food donation to North Korea. The United States also gave North Korea the option of face-to-face contacts on several occasions and especially in times of crisis, such as when the North Korean and South Korean navies clashed in the Yellow Sea. This led to some progress, such as North Korea deciding not to conduct new tests of its long-range missiles for the duration of the talks, in an effort to show goodwill and engagement with the de-escalation process. Those small successful steps were highlighted in the Perry Report, a comprehensive assessment of various strategies dealing with North Korea, as the report suggested that engaging North Korea through various outlets instead of alienating Pyongyang would be more likely to avert a war.

Sensing that there might be opportunities to gain momentum in dealing with North Korea, President Clinton followed Perry's recommendations and decided to ease some of the sanctions it had imposed on Pyongyang. Being encouraged by the inter-Korea summit between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il in 2000, which also led to many North and South Korean families having the opportunity to spend some time together, a first since the partition of the Koreas in the 1940s, Washington promised to renew talks on the difficult topic of North Korea's missile program, while receiving guarantees from Pyongyang that no missile would be tested. The Clinton administration's North Korean policy came to its apex with Secretary of State Madeleine

Albright's visit to Pyongyang in 2000, and her meeting with North Korean officials, including an audience with Kim Jong-il himself. It became later known that the visit was tied to the impasse reached on many occasions on the topic of North Korean missiles, with Washington trying to "give face" to North Korea by sending a high-level government representative, and possibly also planning for a visit by President Clinton following an invitation delivered by General Politburo Director Cho Myong-Nok in person in Washington. The momentum was not achieved, though, as the Clinton administration was succeeded by the Republican Bush team in early 2001.

## **The Bush Years: From Blatant Exclusion to Multilateral Negotiations**

The Bush administration foreign policy toward North Korea was characterized, just like the Clinton administration, by a mixture of sanctions and incentives, as well as alienation, but was mostly notable for the use of multilateral diplomacy through the Six-Party Talks in an effort to curb North Korea's growing nuclear program. This followed in the footsteps of the largely unsuccessful Four-Party Talks, which had been unable to bring about a peaceful and permanent conclusion to the Korean Armistice. In terms of policy at the beginning of the Bush administration, Secretary of State Colin Powell was quick to reaffirm that the new administration would attempt to continue the efforts regarding North Korea that had been made by the Clinton administration. When South Korean president Kim Dae-jung visited Washington in spring 2001, though, President Bush could not commit fully to support the Sunshine Policy, as he had doubts about North Korea's credibility and will to denuclearize. This position led to North Korea subsequently withdrawing from upcoming ministerial talks that were supposed to take place with South Korea.

The Bush policy toward North Korea took a real turn after the September 11, 2001, attacks that eventually led Bush to label North Korea as part of an "Axis of Evil" during his State of the Union address in January 2002. The Axis of Evil speech marked a departure from most of the Bush administration's efforts to engage Pyongyang, and also ran counter to the recommendations that had been presented in the Perry report a few years back. The Bush administration then engaged in a hard-line policy that culminated in North Korea acknowledging it had nuclear weapons, reactivating its Yongbyon reactor, excluding international inspectors, and withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. If Pyongyang appeared to isolate itself from most countries and institutions, Washington also removed itself from most of diplomatic attempts and multilateral efforts, refusing North Korea's offer to freeze its nuclear program by the end of 2003 in exchange for American concessions, and flat-out turning down an offer of a bilateral non-aggression pact. Washington also became increasingly preoccupied with the situation in the Middle East as a result of the September 11 attacks and the Afghanistan strike. With the war in Iraq also raging, the Bush administration increasingly relied on China to be a broker in the North Korea nuclear conundrum, a task that China took to heart and carried out somewhat successfully.



One of the most contentious and contested ideas at the Six-Party Talks was the “Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Dismantlement” of North Korean nuclear facilities. The concept was created by the United States in the early days of the talks, and was widely supported by South Korea (at least initially) and especially Japan, which advocated for nothing short of the full application of the concept, without provision of any concession in exchange. North Korea rejected the wording and concept in toto, and stayed inflexible when the term was used. President Bush’s reelection in fall 2004 saw a resurgence of the CVID rhetoric, with both South Korea and China being reluctant once again to use the term, as it would imply that North Korea was a nuclear state (North Korean confirmation of its uranium-enriched program would come many years later, though, in 2011). But the second G. W. Bush administration also brought about a more unified understanding of North Korea and of the necessity to pursue multilateral negotiations: indeed, the tandem relationship between Condoleezza Rice and Christopher Hill seemed to be more suitable for President Bush than the team previously formed by Colin Powell and Richard Armitage. Though CVID was not explicitly mentioned thereafter, U.S. messages still included some aspects of it, with Christopher Hill insisting on the need to find a verifiable mechanism that included dismantlement while recognizing in a straightforward manner that the concept had somehow alienated some of Washington’s allies at a time when the United States was already having little success in operations abroad, as in Iraq, for example.

North Korea’s acknowledgment in February 2005 that it had indeed developed nuclear weapons and that it would withdraw from international forums dealing with its weapons was short-lived, however. Indeed, China’s efforts to bring North Korea to the negotiation table and to attempt to draft an agreement that would suit all parties resulted in the September 19 Agreement. North Korea’s various statements during the summer 2005 round of negotiation forced parties, however, to consider the elephant in the room: indeed, the very nature of the 1994 Agreed Framework and its provision to build light-water reactors meant that the parties that had joined the consortium then had envisioned a North Korea that would be using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. As such, the September 19 Agreement seemingly settled the nearly two-year-long discussion on peaceful use of nuclear energy, and Pyongyang even agreed to international inspections, while indicating that the issue of the light-water reactors would be assessed “at a later date.” The celebrations were short-lived, however, as North Korea demanded, the day after the agreement was signed, that the light-water reactors be provided before it would scrap its nuclear program. This position was largely unacceptable for vociferous Japan, the United States and Russia, while South Korea was more subdued when it came to Washington’s refusal of the North’s position. The Bush administration stayed rather inflexible thereafter, refusing calls from North Korea to hold bilateral meetings and instead waiting for Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party negotiation table with the help of China. As the talks resumed in February 2007, a breakthrough was finally achieved with the signing of the February 13, 2007, Joint Statement, an agreement that presented a blueprint that would allow for the United States to lift financial sanctions imposed

on Pyongyang within a month, while at the same time asking North Korea to take steps to dismantle its nuclear facilities within a period of two months. Despite more delays, North Korea eventually disabled parts of its Yongbyon reactor facility, and though it missed the December 31, 2007, deadline to submit verification materials, Pyongyang finally managed to present the documents by mid-2008, in the end being rewarded by its ultimate removal from the United States list of states sponsoring terrorism.

## The Obama Administration and the Six-Party Talks: Is There a Policy?

The change from a Republican to a Democrat administration following the 2008 presidential election paved the way for a seemingly new approach in terms of U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy, with Barack Obama campaigning on dialogue and ideas of openness of discussion with leaders of all countries, including more problematic ones such as North Korea. At her Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary of State nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton reiterated this engagement, and suggested that the Bush administration policies toward North Korea would be comprehensively reviewed so as to craft a new approach for the Korean Peninsula. She also firmly stated that the Six-Party Talks were an important tool that should be used in order to denuclearize North Korea.

Despite the Obama administration's stated commitment to change and its reversal of many policies and decisions that had been made by the Bush administration, no new policies were enacted when it came to North Korea. It continued the existing approach, a mix of demands for denuclearization and inflexibility when considering the removal of economic sanctions. In so doing, it revealed a problematic aspect of the United States' commitment to the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, it appears difficult to delineate a unique, new approach, as there is none, and up to a few months ago as of this writing, many of the same American diplomats who had been working on the North Korean issues had stayed in their posts, carried over from the Bush administration, such as Christopher Hill, for example.

The Obama administration focused a lot of energy and thought on strengthening and revitalizing its partnerships with other Six-Party members, such as China, and Secretary of State Clinton traveled in early February 2009 to South Korea, Japan and China, expressing her support for the Six-Party Talks once again. The diplomatic offensive also included an Asia trip in March by Stephen Bosworth as U.S. special representative to North Korea, and meetings with Chinese, Japanese and South Korean officials. The number of meetings that the United States held with various Six-Party partners, and the nature of some of American engagements, such as planned U.S.–South Korea joint military exercises for early March, irritated North Korea, as no real diplomatic overtures had been made toward Pyongyang, except for the reiteration of previous policies and messages pointing to the fact that North Korea had to return to the talks first and denuclearize before any sanction could be removed.

The North's decision to test new rocket missiles exacerbated the situation, with the United States and the other Six-Party members strongly urging North Korea not to proceed. From then on, most of the U.S. policies toward North Korea can be considered as under the "urging" umbrella: strong rhetoric asking North Korea to stop a specific action and return to the talks, but no real diplomatic offer or give-and-take apart from this one-liner. North Korea's choice to publicly withdraw from the Six-Party Talks in April 2009 led to an even stronger reinforcement of the "urging" politics, with various figures such as Secretary Clinton publicly speaking on the need to remain tough with North Korea. The envoy diplomacy continued, with Stephen Bosworth traveling again in May to Asia to meet with China, South Korea, Japan and Russia, but not North Korea. Calls for North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks persisted all through the summer of 2009, with the only direct American contact with North Korea being when Bill Clinton traveled to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong-il to negotiate a pardon for two American women journalists, hence making face-to-face contact with Pyongyang, a demand that North Korea had often made but was granted only a few times in the past decades.

Trying to deflect criticism that it was maintaining a closed-door policy with Pyongyang, the Obama administration reiterated its calls for North Korea to rejoin the Six-Party Talks, stressing that Pyongyang would have the opportunity to converse with other partners there and then. At the same time, President Obama relied on seasoned Democrat envoys, such as New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, who has nurtured contacts with North Korea for several decades. The message, though, was always the same: bilateral contacts are possible only via multilateral negotiations within the Six-Party Talks format. Economic sanctions kept on being imposed on Pyongyang while diplomatic relations with other partners expanded once more, with Stephen Bosworth visiting Asia again in the fall, and then with Kurt Campbell as special envoy to China and Japan in October 2009, culminating in President Obama's eight-day Asia tour to South Korea, China, Japan and Singapore. Finally, after more than a year in place, the Obama administration authorized Bosworth to have direct contacts with North Korea, allowing him to fly to Pyongyang for a three-day trip in December.

The United States largely acknowledged and bolstered direct Chinese diplomatic efforts towards North Korea as Kim Jong-il's visit to Beijing in the spring of 2010 was perceived as a potential restarter of the Six-Party Talks process. But the *Cheonan* incident derailed the minuscule progress that had been made, as the United States insisted on a full resolution of the incident before any further moves could be made on the Six-Party Talks front. There was also a return to scrutiny over North Korea's financial transactions, with the United States blacklisting two more North Korean entities and various individuals in an effort to cut financial support to North Korean leaders. Further North Korean provocations, including the disclosure of its uranium enrichment plans and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island did not alter American diplomacy much, as the Obama administration hewed to the same rhetoric it had used for the past two years and carried into 2011: condemning North Korean provocations, calling for an end to the North Korean nuclear program, asking Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks and increasing sanctions and financial scrutiny.

## Going Beyond the Stalemate, but How?

North Korea has now been engaged by the United States for almost twenty years, and there is a mixed record of achievements. On the one hand, supporters of the Sunshine Policy and of various engagement efforts could argue that, given the intransigence and opacity of the North Korean regime, discussions and negotiations have been rather successful at keeping Pyongyang responsive. Whether the international community and especially the United States have failed to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear weapons state is, however, more complex to assess, as it can be argued that the Agreed Framework was unable to ensure that Pyongyang would not divert its alleged peaceful nuclear energy capacities to achieve other purposes. On the other hand, supporters of hard-line policies could argue that it is impossible to negotiate with North Korea as there is a strong defection record on the part of Pyongyang, and because North Korea is, for all purposes, a rogue state that has no intention of ever letting go of its nuclear weapons.

The Six-Party Talks have now been at a standstill for more than two years, and the prospect for a new round of talks appears compromised if parties do not depart from their current positions. It is rather clear that the United States is still trying to isolate North Korea and prevent Pyongyang from becoming a full-scale nuclear power. But Iran being offered negotiations with other entities such as the European Union could indicate a shift: perhaps it is time to realize that North Korea should now be considered as a full-fledged nuclear power, as this would mean that previously agreed-upon mechanisms and targets from the September 19, 2005, Agreement and the 2007 Joint Statement should be reevaluated in order to move the Six-Party Talks process further. But the main question is whether the United States is ready to start a new nonproliferation conversation with North Korea, one that would consider Pyongyang as not just a temporary danger to address, but as a permanent nuclear player. If this is the case, then there is a need for a radical transformation of the Six-Party Talks, as the process is firmly anchored in the principle of Korean denuclearization. With the concept of CVID revived and used by the Obama administration, it is important to consider whether the framework would still be valid if North Korea is understood as a nuclear power. While the United States' strategy has been largely consistent since the talks' inception, the fact that the process has largely become an uncooperative one is problematic.

The talks have also been hindered by sanctions, rewards, and expectations of North Korea. The United States has been the main driver for economic sanctions, either imposing them or refusing to remove them. Coupled with the U.S. policy of "urging" North Korea to return to the talks unconditionally, the issue of sanctions has now led to a completely blocked process. Coercive diplomacy, however, has never proven to be overtly successful for the United States, and with North Korea busy with its leadership transition that comes complete with domestic propaganda and political maneuvers to legitimize Kim Jong-un in the eyes of both the North Korean population as well as the surrounding elites, it is unlikely that North Korean behavior will be swayed at this point by either carrots or sticks.

The United States, however, has had a habit of using the issue of normalization as a reward within the Six-Party Talks process, promising an eventual consideration of the issue once more important steps related to nuclear weapons programs are taken. Are the goals of denuclearization and normalization mutually exclusive? It could indeed be the case if the United States continues to be reluctant in talking to North Korea directly: the United States has a long history of negotiations and talks with North Korea during the past twenty years, and has fared better in negotiations when it gives the face-to-face contact that North Korea requested. Talking with all the other Six-Party members through diplomatic meets is important, but North Korea is the main actor that is being targeted when it comes to denuclearization, and should therefore be consulted and listened to. There might be, however, ideological difference within the Obama administration on this point: just as President Bush and Colin Powell did not see eye to eye many years ago yet worked together, sharp divisions erupted during the 2008 campaign between Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton on the topic of whether the United States should talk directly to dictators. President Obama also had to contend with suggestions that he was not tough enough to deal with international challenges. His inflexibility toward the Korean Peninsula, however, does not currently help the situation. Perhaps one term in office is not enough time to organize and maintain a coherent policy in an area that has so many uncertainties and that presents so many dangers. Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had two terms in office to develop their policies, and only the upcoming 2012 presidential election can tell whether the Obama administration will manage to maintain its hold on power. No matter the outcome and the future president, managing the North Korean problem by maintaining the status quo will prove disastrous given North Korea's emerging new leader.

## Notes

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