

# U.S.–North Korea Relations under the Obama Administration: Problems and Prospects

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## Abstract

North Korea's nuclear weapons program has been a major headache for the U.S. throughout the post–Cold War era. Pyongyang's attempt to develop nuclear weapons got the nation into serious problems with both the Clinton administration (1993–2001) and the Bush administration (2001–2009), as both U.S. administrations maintained that the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons was essential for the preservation of the existing international order. Although the U.S. succeeded in persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program through the six-party talks by September 2005 (i.e., the September 19 Joint Statement), Pyongyang did not fulfill its commitment on denuclearization by the end of 2008. As a result, the Obama administration has inherited the unfinished task of implementing the agreement on North Korea's denuclearization.

The purpose of this paper is to examine U.S.–North Korean relations during the early phase of the Obama administration with emphasis on the analysis of the administration's handling of the North Korean denuclearization issue from the time of its inauguration in January 2009 to the present. Like his predecessors, President Obama is determined to bring about the denuclearization of North Korea, because the proliferation of nuclear weapons by a rogue nation such as North Korea could not only pose serious threats to the U.S. but also spell the end of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Unless North Korea returns to the Six-Party Talks for denuclearization, the U.S. will not relax sanctions against Pyongyang.

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## Introduction

The inauguration of President Obama in January 2009 aroused expectations in Pyongyang that the strained relationship between North Korea and the U.S. would improve under the new U.S. administration, for Obama had indicated during the 2008 presidential campaign his willingness to meet even with leaders of rogue nations, such as Kim Jong-Il of North Korea, if that was what it would take to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. However, contrary to North Korea's expectations, the bilateral relationship between the two countries has not improved but has deteriorated further, especially after North Korea's missile and nuclear tests in the spring of 2009.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine U.S.–North Korean relations under the Obama administration from the time of the inauguration on January 20, 2009, to the present with emphasis on an analysis of the factors which have contributed to the deterioration of the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and North Korea. It is a major contention of this paper that, like his predecessors, President Obama is determined to bring about the denuclearization of North Korea and will not relax sanctions against Pyongyang so long as North Korea persists in its ambitious nuclear weapons program.

## The Obama Administration's Approach to North Korea

During the presidential campaign in 2008, Obama said that he would be willing to sit down with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il if it would help persuade the North to give up its nuclear weapons program.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, such a statement aroused the expectations on the part of North Koreans that an Obama presidency would provide an opportunity for improved relations. Pyongyang seemed hopeful for an end to what it called the "regime change" policy of the Bush administration and anticipated better relations with United States.<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to establish cordial relations with Washington, North Korea conveyed its wish to send a representative to the Obama inauguration. However, the Obama transition team turned the request down,<sup>3</sup> a decision based on the fact that there were no official diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Apparently, North Korea was not near the top of the Obama administration's foreign policy priorities. It was also not clear how much time or attention Obama's foreign policy team would pay to North Korea, given urgent problems in such locations as the Gaza Strip, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, signs of troubles for the Obama administration's North Korea policy began to surface on the eve of

the new president's inauguration. According to Selig Harrison, who visited Pyongyang in mid-January 2009, North Koreans had "very high hopes for Obama, but they want to confront him from a position of strength." North Korea made it clear that it had no intention of giving up nuclear weapons before normalizing relations with the U.S.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman declared on the eve of Obama's inauguration that "our status as a nuclear weapons state will never flounder as long as the U.S. nuclear threat remains, even a bit." He went on to say that "we can live without normalized relations [with the U.S.], but can't live without nuclear deterrence."<sup>6</sup> Although President Obama has emphasized his intention to depart from President George W. Bush's policy of unilateralism and shift toward multilateral cooperation, it has become increasingly clear that, insofar as the U.S. policy toward North Korea is concerned, the bottom line is (in the words of *The Daily Yomiuri*) "continuation rather than change" on the nuclear issue.<sup>7</sup> Like his predecessors, Obama firmly believes that the prevention of nuclear proliferation is vital, not only to the security of the U.S. but to the preservation of the existing international system. In fact, as Joseph Cirincione of the Ploughshares Fund points out, Obama "has the most detailed, comprehensive, and transformative nuclear policy agenda any candidate has ever carried into the White House." Obama has promised to thwart nuclear terrorism by "securing" all loose nuclear materials, to reduce nuclear threats by cutting existing nuclear and missile arsenals of the major powers, and to prevent any new nuclear weapons by strictly enforcing nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and technology.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in his inauguration address, Obama pledged to remove the danger of nuclear threat from the world.

Obama was prompt in organizing his national security team after winning the presidency. He nominated his major rival in the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, as his secretary of state, the key foreign policy position, while retaining the Bush administration's Robert Gates as secretary of defense. Subsequently, he appointed a number of additional experts on East Asian affairs to serve on his national security team. Increasingly, observers have noted that Obama is more pragmatic in dealing with foreign policy issues than many had expected. A clear direction of the Obama administration's North Korea policy was indicated by Secretary Clinton's confirmation statement: "Our goal is to end the North Korean nuclear program — both the plutonium reprocessing program and the highly enriched uranium program, which there is reason to believe exists, although never quite verified."<sup>9</sup> She indicated also that normalized relations between Washington and Pyongyang would not be possible until North Korea fully gave up its nuclear weapons programs and answered outstanding questions. At the same time, she placed much emphasis on the "merit" of the six-power talks as a main vehicle for negotiating with Pyongyang.

In her first press conference as U.S. secretary of state, Clinton said that the Six-Party Talks were "essential" to ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program and that North Korea's nuclear issue should be resolved quickly, through bilateral as well as the Six-Party Talks.<sup>10</sup> In a written statement submitted to the House Armed Services Committee, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates expressed a similar view, stating "The Six-Party Talks have been critical in producing some forward momen-

tum, especially with respect to North Korea's plutonium production.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, U.S. State Department spokesman Robert Wood said in a daily press briefing in early February that the Obama administration was reviewing its policy “with regard to North Korea and its nuclear weapons programme,” without specifying a time frame for the reviewing process. He also pointed out that the U.S. wanted “North Korea to sign on to a verification protocol and all of the details in writing,” even though the “North didn't want to do that.” Wood maintained that “the ball really is in the North's court with regard to meeting ... the obligations that it agreed to.”<sup>12</sup>

## North Korea's Missile Test

Following Obama's inauguration, North Korea began to take a series of provocative actions toward South Korea and the U.S. Pyongyang's belligerent posture was underscored by a fresh threat toward South Korea, when the chief of general staff of the North Korean army announced in mid-January that North Korea would take up all-out confrontation with South Korea, including military actions, for South Korean “puppet military war hawks” had “driven our revolutionary armed forces to take a strong step” against them.<sup>13</sup> It was followed by another provocative announcement on January 31, when North Korea announced its decision to nullify all military and political agreements with South Korea, including the armistice agreement of 1953 which had ended the Korean War, after accusing South Korea of aggressive posturing. Such a declaration inevitably heightened tensions and increased the possibility of an armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>14</sup>

Against this background, Obama reaffirmed his pledge to strengthen the U.S.–South Korean alliance and to denuclearize North Korea through the Six-Party Talks.<sup>15</sup> In his telephone call to South Korean president Lee in early February, Obama said that the denuclearization of North Korea could be achieved only through the Six-Party Talks and that the Seoul-Washington alliance remained crucial to resolving the issue.<sup>16</sup> Tensions began to mount rapidly thereafter, as the South Korean national intelligence agency detected the fact that the North was preparing to test-fire its long-range ballistic missile, the *Taepodong 2*, which could reach as far as Alaska and the West Coast of the U.S.<sup>17</sup> The launch was clearly designed to test the intentions of the Obama administration.<sup>18</sup> U.S. officials took the North's missile test seriously and urged Pyongyang to stop raising tensions in the region. General Walter L. Sharp, the top U.S. commander in South Korea, delivered a speech calling on Pyongyang to “stop the provocations that have been going on, whether it is declaring old agreements to be no longer valid or missile technology that they continue to develop.”<sup>19</sup>

During her first overseas trip as secretary of state in February, Hillary Clinton warned that North Korea's planned long-range missile test would jeopardize the prospects of normalizing relations with the U.S.<sup>20</sup> In a press conference in Tokyo, she urged North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. “If North Korea verifiably and completely eliminates its nuclear programme, then there will be a

chance to normalize relations, to enter into a peace treaty rather than an armistice and to give assistance for the people of North Korea.”<sup>21</sup> On the question of North Korea’s long-range missile test, Clinton said that it would be “very unhelpful in moving our relationship forward.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, she made it clear that the U.S. remained committed to strengthening its alliances with Japan and South Korea.<sup>23</sup> In Seoul, she declared that U.S. was determined to defend South Korea and to secure “a complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea.”<sup>24</sup>

Against the backdrop of rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang announced on February 26 that it was planning to launch an “experimental communications satellite.” However, both U.S. and South Korean officials believed on the basis of intelligence reports that North Korea was preparing to test-fire its *Taepodong 2* ballistic missile. During her visit to China in March, Secretary of State Clinton reiterated her warning to Pyongyang not to launch the long-range ballistic missile, advising that a launch could bring about serious consequences. A similar warning was also issued in March by Stephen Bosworth, a newly appointed U.S. special envoy on North Korea. He urged Pyongyang to refrain from launching either a missile or a satellite, saying that the launch would be in violation of the 2006 UN Security Council Resolution 1718.<sup>25</sup> By mid-March 2009, it had become increasingly clear that North Korea’s planned missile test-firing was designed to bolster the power and prestige of Kim Jong-Il, who had suffered a stroke in mid-August 2008 and had disappeared from the political scene for nearly three months. Since Kim was to start his third term as chairman of the National Defense Commission in early April 2009, when the newly elected North Korean Supreme People’s Assembly would reelect him in its opening session, a successful launch of the long-range rocket would greatly enhance his prestige and power as the leader of North Korea. In addition, a successful launch could also strengthen Kim’s hands in handpicking his successor, reported to be his third son, Jong-Un. Moreover, the planned launch was also designed to bolster North Korea’s leverage in dealing with the new Obama administration. Apparently, Kim was disappointed by the Obama administration’s uncompromising stance on the denuclearization issue and the lack of any overtures toward the North for a rapprochement.

Ignoring the warnings from the U.S. and its allies, North Korea launched a long-range ballistic missile on April 5, in clear violation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1718, prohibiting the North from engaging in a ballistic missile program. Although North Korea insisted that it had launched the rocket to place a communications satellite in orbit, the U.S. and its allies took that explanation as a cover for a ballistic missile test. Immediately, Obama denounced North Korea’s action, warning that the launch would be subject to international sanctions. South Korea also condemned the North’s missile launch. Under the strong urging of the U.S., the UN Security Council unanimously adopted on April 13 a presidential statement condemning North Korea’s long-range rocket launch as contravening Resolution 1718. It also demanded the enforcement of existing sanctions against Pyongyang by member states. In addition, it called on Pyongyang to end future missile launches. Shortly thereafter, on April 24, the Security Council imposed financial and trade sanctions

on three North Korean firms which were instrumental in helping North Korea's ballistic missile program.<sup>26</sup>

North Korea's reaction was quick and hostile. Pyongyang declared its decision to expel International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and began to reactivate its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon. Furthermore, it announced that it had begun reprocessing spent fuel rods to produce weapons-grade plutonium in defiance of the existing six-party agreements on denuclearization. In addition, North Korea declared its intentions "never" to attend the Six-Party Talks in the future.<sup>27</sup> Pyongyang not only denounced the UN Security Council president's statement as unjust, but also demanded an apology from the Security Council.<sup>28</sup>

In an attempt to dissuade Pyongyang from conducting a nuclear test, Secretary of State Clinton urged that it refrain from provocative acts and return to the Six-Party Talks. South Korean president Lee urged Pyongyang to do the same. However, North Korea vowed "never" to return to the Six-Party Talks, while reiterating its intentions to reactivate the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, reprocess the spent nuclear fuel to produce weapons-grade plutonium, and carry out both nuclear and missile tests.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Pyongyang declared that it would begin a uranium enrichment program unless the UN lifted its sanctions.<sup>30</sup> By making these threats, Pyongyang was hoping to raise the stakes in its standoff with the U.S., as Pyongyang's nuclear program remained its main, and probably only, attention-gathering tool and bargaining chip.<sup>31</sup> In spite of Pyongyang's provocations, Clinton maintained that the U.S. would have "to be strong, patient and consistent and not give in to ... the unpredictable behavior of the North Korean regime."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in her testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee on April 30, Clinton made it clear that the U.S. would not provide economic aid to North Korea unless Pyongyang stopped making nuclear and missile threats and returned to the Six-Party Talks.<sup>33</sup> In a related move, Obama assumed a firmer position in dealing with Pyongyang by saying that "If North Koreans do not meet their obligations, we should move quickly to reimpose sanctions that have been waived and consider new restrictions going forward."<sup>34</sup> North Korea's reactions to the Obama administration's warnings were negative and hostile. Its official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, denounced the U.S. role in bringing about the UN Security Council's adoption of sanctions against Pyongyang's rocket launch in April.<sup>35</sup> It went on to say that there were few differences between the Obama administration and its predecessor insofar as their North Korea policy was concerned.<sup>36</sup> In a related move, a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman declared that under the Obama administration the U.S. "hostile policy" toward Pyongyang "remains unchanged."<sup>37</sup> He went on to say that the "unchanged" American hostility had forced Pyongyang to resume and bolster its nuclear weapons program.

## North Korea's Second Nuclear Test

In spite of the urging of the major powers to return to the Six-Party Talks, North Korea's defiance and provocation continued to escalate. In a surprise move, on May

25 Pyongyang shocked the world by conducting a large-scale underground nuclear test, again in clear violation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1718. “North Korea’s programs pose a grave threat to the peace and security of the world,” declared President Obama immediately after the North’s nuclear test.<sup>38</sup> Leaders of other major powers issued similar condemnations. Meeting in emergency session, the UN Security Council also unanimously condemned North Korea’s nuclear test as violating the ban imposed on Pyongyang in 2006.

Unlike the first nuclear test in October 2006, which had been regarded as a partial failure, the May test was comparable to the American atomic bombs dropped on Japan in early August 1945, suggesting that Pyongyang possessed a workable nuclear device and was indeed serious about becoming a nuclear power.<sup>39</sup> Pyongyang’s provocative actions aroused serious concerns in South Korea and Japan. In order to calm the anxiety of Seoul and Tokyo, Obama reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea and Japan against any aggression from North Korea.<sup>40</sup> He also declared that “North Korea’s actions endanger the people of North-east Asia.” Denouncing North Korea’s action as a “blatant violation of international law,” Obama reaffirmed his determination to “work with our friends and allies to stand up to this behavior.”<sup>41</sup> He also made it clear that the U.S. would impose additional sanctions on North Korea through the UN Security Council. At the same time, he urged North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks on denuclearization. North Korea’s defiant moves clearly indicated Pyongyang’s decision to go for the nuclear path by building up its nuclear arsenals as “deterrents” against the U.S. and its allies rather than following the denuclearization path. It was not too difficult to understand why Kim opted for such a policy, for the acquisition of nuclear weapons was believed to be the most effective way to deal with a number of critical tasks confronting his regime, including regime survival, the transfer of hereditary power to one of his sons, and the strengthening of Pyongyang’s leverage in dealing with the U.S. and its allies in East Asia. Besides, Kim was obsessed with fulfilling his much-publicized promise to build a “Powerful and Prosperous Great Nation” by 2012, the centennial of his late father’s (Kim Il-Sung) birthday. As Kim revealed to his audience at a recent meeting, the “Powerful and Prosperous Great Nation” slogan means essentially the establishment of a nuclear-armed North Korea which is internationally recognized as a full-fledged nuclear power. Apparently, Kim regards the acquisition of nuclear power status for North Korea by 2012 as the most important goal of his regime.

Against this background, Secretary of State Clinton said that the U.S. would continue to ratchet up pressure on North Korea. Among other things, Washington has considered reinstating North Korea on a list of state sponsors of terrorism. It has also pushed for a UN Security Council resolution that would punish Pyongyang financially and give the international community the power to interdict suspect North Korean cargo.<sup>42</sup> “We will do everything we can to both interdict it and prevent it and shut off their flow of money,” she said.<sup>43</sup> Hillary Clinton also urged North Korea to release two American journalists sentenced to twelve years in a labor camp after being detained for their illegal entry into the North in March while on a reporting tour.<sup>44</sup>

On June 12, 2009, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a new resolution (1874) to punish North Korea for its nuclear and missile tests. The resolution imposed further economic and commercial sanctions, including an arms embargo and a provision encouraging inspections in ports and on the high seas of North Korean ships suspected of carrying nuclear technology. It also urged North Korea to halt its nuclear weapons program and to conduct no further nuclear or missile tests. However, North Korea, calling itself a “proud nuclear power,” vowed to forge ahead with its nuclear program in defiance of the latest UN resolution. In a statement released by the North Korean Foreign Ministry, Pyongyang declared its intention to weaponize its remaining stockpile of plutonium and to pursue uranium enrichment.<sup>45</sup> It added that it would consider any attempt at a blockade as an “act of war that will be met with a decisive military response,” and “would counter ‘sanctions’ with retaliation.”<sup>46</sup>

At a joint press conference with South Korean president Lee Myung-Bak on June 16, President Obama declared his intention to break the “pattern” of continuing to reward North Korea’s threatening behavior in an effort to end Pyongyang’s pursuit of a nuclear weapons program. “There’s been a pattern in the past where North Korea behaves in a belligerent fashion, and if it waits long enough, is then rewarded with foodstuffs and fuel and concessionary loans and a whole range of benefits.”<sup>47</sup> He added that the U.S. and its global partners would “make it clear to North Korea it will not find security or respect through threats or illegal weapons.” At the same time, he said he would pursue denuclearization “vigorously.”<sup>48</sup> In addition to the UN sanctions, the U.S. was prepared to apply broad financial pressure to force North Korea to dial back its nuclear weapons program. The U.S. Treasury Department assumed a leading role, working through international banking channels to try to restrict funds to 17 North Korean banks and companies which were believed to be central players in Pyongyang’s nuclear and weapons trade.<sup>49</sup> Apparently, the U.S. Treasury Department’s 2005 blacklisting of Macau’s Banco Delta Asia, in which North Korea held a number of accounts, was viewed as a model. The result was a run on the Macau bank’s accounts and a contagious effect that nearly froze North Korea out of the international banking system in 2006.<sup>50</sup> One of the key architects of the Bush administration’s sanction against Banco Delta Asia, Stuart Levey, the Treasury Department’s undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, was tapped to lead the Obama administration’s financial clampdown on North Korea.<sup>51</sup>

North Korea adopted a defiant posture against the international community and continued its saber-rattling behavior by launching a number of missiles, seven on July 4, which was a deliberate act of defiance against the U.S. and apparently timed for the U.S. Independence Day. It was also “a demonstration of their defiance and rejection of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874,” according to an editorial in the *Korea Herald*.<sup>52</sup>

In an attempt to bring a defiant North Korea to heel over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, the UN Security Council on July 16 imposed sanctions on five trading companies and five individuals, while banning the trade of two goods linked to building ballistic missiles.<sup>53</sup> The cited North Korean companies and



individuals were considered the “core elements” involved in North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.<sup>54</sup> The sanctions included a travel ban and an asset freeze on the five individuals. The call for these new sanctions was based on the Security Council’s Resolution 1874, and was recommended by the sanctions committee of the Security Council.

## Obama’s Two-Track Approach

In spite of the Security Council’s decision to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, the Obama administration’s policy toward North Korea was not rigid but pragmatic and flexible, as explained in mid-July by Kurt Campbell, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. According to Campbell, although North Korea would face sanctions for its provocative acts, it was not too late for Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table, for the door remained open to the Six-Party Talks on denuclearization. “We still wish them to return to the Six-Party Talks and responsible negotiations.” Campbell said in Tokyo on July 17.<sup>55</sup> Campbell went a step further during his visit to Seoul, where he indicated the willingness to offer a “comprehensive package” of incentives for North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program. He urged North Korea to take “serious and irreversible steps” over its nuclear program as a precondition for a “comprehensive package” of incentives.<sup>56</sup> Thus, according to Campbell, the U.S. had a “two track” strategy of vigorously enforcing sanctions, while seeking ways to resume dialogue with North Korea.<sup>57</sup> Campbell reiterated the American position that “If North Korea is prepared to take serious and irreversible steps, the U.S., South Korea, Japan, China and others will be able to put together a comprehensive package that would be attractive to North Korea.” However, “North Korea really has to take some of the first steps,” Campbell told reporters in Seoul.<sup>58</sup>

At the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on July 22, Secretary of State Clinton also reiterated the possibility of offering a package of incentives to North Korea by saying: “We made it clear to the North Koreans that if they will agree to irreversible denuclearization,” then the U.S. “will move forward with a package of incentives and opportunities, including normal relations that will give the people of North Korea a better future.”<sup>59</sup> She made it clear that “complete and irreversible denuclearization was the only viable path” for Pyongyang. At the same time, she added that “We do not intend to reward North Korea just for returning to the table.” It must implement denuclearization agreements before it can receive incentives or rewards, she said.<sup>60</sup> Later, on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Clinton reiterated that North Korea would not be “rewarded for half-measures” toward ending its nuclear weapons program.<sup>61</sup>

On the next day, a senior North Korean diplomat rejected the “comprehensive package” of incentives for Pyongyang that Clinton had proposed at the ARF meeting in Phuket, Thailand. “The comprehensive package is nonsense,” said Ri Hungsik, deputy head of the North Korean delegation to the ARF, for “[i]t is a replay of the Bush administration’s policy of CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible disman-

tlement).”<sup>62</sup> He also said that Pyongyang would not care about UN sanctions imposed on Pyongyang for its nuclear test in May, adding that it had been under similar sanctions “for half a century.”<sup>63</sup> In a press conference held at Phuket, the North Korean delegation reiterated earlier assertions that North Korea would never return to the Six-Party Talks aimed at denuclearizing North Korea.<sup>64</sup>

Against this background, on July 27, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that “there is a specific and reserved form of dialogue” with the U.S. that can address the nuclear issue.<sup>65</sup> A few days earlier, the North Korean ambassador to the UN had also said that his government was “not against a dialogue” with the U.S. The comments from the North Korean Foreign Ministry were seen as an indication of Pyongyang’s apparent willingness to engage the U.S. in bilateral talks, discarding the six-party format. However, such an approach was not acceptable to the U.S. Unlike North Korea, the Obama administration had declared it would engage the North in direct talks only if Pyongyang agreed to return to the Six-Party Talks. As Secretary Clinton emphasized in late July, the U.S. wanted the North’s nuclear problem to be resolved through the Six-Party Talks, the main forum for the discussion of North Korea’s nuclear issue.<sup>66</sup> North Korea, on the other hand, maintained the Six-Party Talks were finished when the other five powers agreed to impose sanctions on North Korea through the UN Security Council in the spring of 2009.<sup>67</sup>

## Pyongyang’s Overtures for the Bilateral Talks with the U.S.

Following the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in July, there were developments indicating that North Korea was more eager to talk with the U.S. On August 4, former president Bill Clinton made a surprise visit to North Korea and met with Kim Jong-Il to try to win freedom for the two jailed U.S. journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee. The women had been sentenced to twelve years of hard labor after being arrested for illegal entry into the North in March. Clinton had a lengthy lunch conversation with Kim and top North Korean officials on matters of mutual concern. The North Korean News Agency said Clinton passed on a verbal message from President Obama. However, the White House denied the report. The next day Clinton returned to the U.S. with the two American journalists, whom Kim had pardoned and released hours after Clinton’s arrival. Clinton’s highly visible visit was arranged by Pyongyang to soften its image in the hope of improving relations with the U.S. It was also designed to boost Kim’s prestige to his domestic audience by pointing that former U.S. president Clinton was paying a visit to the North.

North Korea also adopted a similar posture toward South Korea in early August. At Pyongyang’s invitation, Hyun Jung-Un, head of the Hyundai group, visited the North to discuss thorny issues, including the resumption of the Mount Kumgang tourism project which had been suspended in July 2008. After meeting with Kim Jong-Il, she was able to return with a released Hyundai employee who had been detained by the North in March. Shortly thereafter, North Korea dispatched a high-

level delegation to deliver Kim Jong-Il's condolence to the family of deceased former South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung. North Korea also released four South Korean fishermen whom the North had detained for weeks.

North Korea's conciliatory gestures toward the U.S. and South Korea were obviously aiming at the possible relaxation of sanctions imposed by the UN, which were hurting the North Korean economy. As a result of the arms embargo on North Korea, it had become increasingly difficult for Pyongyang to export arms to Iran, Burma, and other countries from which sales it reportedly earns \$2 billion per year. Furthermore, North Korea could not get any economic assistance from South Korea, which insisted on denuclearization as a condition for economic aid. Also, North Korea could not expect any economic help from the U.S. and other Western nations in the aftermath of the missile and nuclear tests in the spring of 2009. According to a recent study by the Korean Development Institute (KDI), North Korean economic conditions were as dire as they had been at the time of Kim Il-Sung's death in 1994. As a result, Pyongyang had to adopt a tactical shift in an effort to find a way out of its predicament.

While praising Bill Clinton's "humanitarian mission" to bring back the two journalists, President Obama said that it had not eased U.S. and its allies' demands that North Korea alter its behavior if it wished to escape its isolation or international sanctions. "We have said to the North Koreans that there's a path to better relations," Obama said in a television interview. "We just want to make sure the government of North Korea is operating within the basic rules of the international community that they know is expected of them."<sup>68</sup> Obama's message, repeated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, illustrated the determination of the U.S. government not to allow Kim Jong-Il to turn Bill Clinton's visit to Kim's advantage. The Obama administration also took pains through its statements to assure U.S. allies that it would not be lured naively into yet another round of fruitless talks with North Korea.<sup>69</sup> U.S. officials also made it clear that the White House had no plans to change its strategy toward North Korea.<sup>70</sup>

However, North Korea indicated no willingness to return to the Six-Party Talks. Instead of the multilateral forum, Pyongyang repeatedly called for direct talks with the U.S. Among other things, North Korea wants to evade the denuclearization commitments it made at the Six-Party Talks by abolishing the talks themselves. It has also coveted the legitimacy that direct talks with the U.S. would bestow, domestically and internationally.<sup>71</sup> Washington has no interest in replacing the Six-Party Talks with direct talks between the U.S. and North Korea, for it could mean rehashing the North Korean nuclear issue. The Obama administration has thus repeatedly rejected the North's offer to negotiate directly about nuclear weapons and normalizing Washington-Pyongyang relations outside the six-party process. The U.S. also declared its intention to continue sanctions unless and until the North returns to the multilateral forum.<sup>72</sup>

Departing from a month of conciliatory gestures, North Korea announced on September 3 that it was on the verge of developing nuclear warheads with highly enriched uranium. Quoting an official letter sent to the UN Security Council by

North Korea's UN mission in New York, North Korea's official news agency, KCNA, stated, "Experimental uranium enrichment has successfully been conducted to enter into completion phase."<sup>73</sup> The U.S. has long suspected the North of having a secret program to enrich uranium for weapons, but Pyongyang has either denied it or maintained tactical ambivalence about such a program.<sup>74</sup> The KCNA also boasted of Pyongyang's expanding plutonium-based nuclear weapons program by asserting that the "reprocessing of spent fuel rods is in its final phase," while "extracted plutonium [is] being weaponized."<sup>75</sup> It said further that North Korea was ready for "dialogue and sanctions" but that Pyongyang had "no choice but to take yet stronger self-defensive countermeasures."<sup>76</sup>

Pyongyang's provocative statement was apparently designed to put pressure on the Obama administration as the latter has refused to hold bilateral talks with Pyongyang, despite Pyongyang's persistent attempts. In a related move, Pyongyang's official media reported that Kim Jong-Il had proposed direct talks with the U.S. to improve bilateral relations and sign a peace treaty.<sup>77</sup> In an apparent response to Pyongyang's overtures, Stephen Bosworth, the U.S. special envoy on North Korea, told reporters in Tokyo in early September that although no decision had been reached on how to respond to Pyongyang's repeated proposals for direct talks, the U.S. "will be considering that in Washington over the next few weeks."<sup>78</sup>

On September 12, the Obama administration announced that it was prepared to hold direct talks with North Korea in a bid to bring Pyongyang to nuclear disarmament negotiations. According to U.S. assistant secretary of state Philip Crowley, the administration made the offer after consulting with the other members of the Six-Party Talks. He made it clear that "it's a bilateral discussion that [is] hopefully ... within the six-party context" and is "designed to convince North Korea to come back to the six-party process to take affirmative steps towards denuclearization."<sup>79</sup> Crowley denied the move was a significant policy change, indicating rather that it was more of a tactical shift to bring back North Korea to talks.

Against this background, in order to encourage North Korea's return to the Six-Party Talks, China dispatched Dai Bingguo as President Hu Jintao's special envoy to Pyongyang in mid-September. The Chinese envoy presented Kim with Hu's letter, which said in part that it was "China's consistent goal to realize denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to safeguard and promote peace, stability and development of Northeast Asia."<sup>80</sup> In response, Kim told Dai that North Korea still adhered to the "goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" and was "willing to resolve the relevant problems through bilateral and multilateral talks."<sup>81</sup> Such a statement clearly indicated a significant shift in Pyongyang's position on the multilateral talks. The U.S. was encouraged by Kim's statement.

The prospects for the resumption of negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea in bilateral and multilateral contexts became much brighter in the wake of Chinese premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Pyongyang in early October. Kim Jong-Il told the visiting Chinese premier that North Korea "is willing to attend multilateral talks, including the six-party talks, depending on the progress in its talks with the United States."<sup>82</sup> According to KCNA, Kim also told Wen, "Our efforts to attain the goal of

denuclearizing the peninsula remain unchanged.” He went on to say that “the denuclearization of the peninsula was the will of President Kim-Il-Sung.”<sup>83</sup> Kim’s comments were the clearest sign that the North was willing to return to the Six-Party Talks pending the outcome of the U.S.–North Korea bilateral talks.<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that the softening of Pyongyang’s position on the Six-Party Talks was indicated against the backdrop of signing a series of bilateral agreements on China’s economic aid to North Korea, including the construction of a new bridge across the Sino-Korean river border. It also came at a time when the Obama administration was trying to increase pressure on North Korea by targeting Pyongyang’s foreign bank accounts and blocking its arms sales abroad.<sup>85</sup>

However, it remains to be seen whether or not North Korea really intends to return to the Six-Party Talks, for Pyongyang has stressed that its return to the talks will depend on “the progress” in bilateral talks with the U.S. Although there was no official reaction to Kim Jong-Il’s latest statement on the Six-Party Talks, a State Department official said that the U.S. will not agree to one-on-one talks with Pyongyang unless it gets “assurances in advance” that the outcome will lead to the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.<sup>86</sup> According to U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly, the U.S. is “open” to bilateral talks with Pyongyang, but it is “only open to a kind of bilateral dialogue that would lead to the resumption of the six-party talks.”<sup>87</sup> Apparently, Washington wants to receive some assurances from Pyongyang that North Korea is serious about returning to the Six-Party Talks before initiating any direct talks with North Korea.

During Lee Geun’s (a senior North Korean diplomat) visit to the U.S. toward the end of October 2009, both Washington and Pyongyang were able to work out an agreement on the visit of U.S. special envoy Stephen Bosworth to Pyongyang. On November 19, during his visit to Seoul, President Obama announced Bothworth’s visit to Pyongyang on December 8, to conduct talks on the issue of North Korea’s return to the Six-Party Talks on denuclearization. Kang Suk-Ju, North Korea’s first deputy foreign minister, is expected to be Bosworth’s counterpart at the Pyongyang talks.

## Prospects for U.S.–North Korean Relations

Now that U.S.–North Korea bilateral talks are scheduled for early December, what are the prospects for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks? More importantly, what are the prospects for the denuclearization of North Korea under the Obama administration? First of all, the bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang will not be smooth sailing in view of the professed positions of both sides. Furthermore, even if the North agrees to return to the Six-Party Talks, no quick settlement can be expected. The U.S. wants North Korea to complete the remaining task of the denuclearization of North Korea, such as the verification protocol, whereas Pyongyang will likely bring up a number of related issues to the peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, speaking to the U.S. as a “nuclear power.”

While the U.S. and other parties to the talks will focus on the full implementation of important agreements on denuclearization (the September 19 Joint Statement, the February 13 Action Plan, etc.), North Korea is likely to demand the implementation of several important promises made by the U.S. and other powers in the same agreements, such as the normalization of diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Japan, the provision of economic assistance, a security guarantee by the United States, and the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace treaty. In the case of normalizing diplomatic ties with Japan, there has been no progress at all from September 2005 to the present, largely because of the thorny “abduction” issue.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, North Korea has not been able to get any substantial economic aid from the U.S., Japan, or South Korea. It goes without saying that North Korea should blame itself for the lack of progress in resolving these issues, because its saber-rattling behavior has made it impossible for the other parties to fulfill their promises and commitments.

In anticipation of the resumption of a dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang and the possible resumption of the Six-Party Talks thereafter, officials in Washington and Seoul have already begun to discuss the best way to approach North Korea in the forthcoming talks. For example, U.S. assistant secretary of state Kurt Campbell proposed a “comprehensive package” to settle the North’s denuclearization once and for all. In a similar fashion, President Lee proposed the idea of a “grand bargain.” In essence, it calls for the irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear facilities and programs in exchange for a security guarantee and economic assistance to North Korea by the other five powers.<sup>89</sup> During his visit to Seoul on September 20, U.S. deputy secretary of state James Steinberg said that the United States was in agreement with South Korea on a “comprehensive approach” to North Korea’s denuclearization.<sup>90</sup> Stressing the need to break the vicious cycle of North Korea reaching a nuclear deal, reneging on it, and returning to the provocative behavior, Steinberg declared, “What we need is a comprehensive and definitive resolution of the nuclear question.”<sup>91</sup> To be sure, Lee’s “grand bargain” proposal requires further details as it does not address all the issues involved in the denuclearization process. Nevertheless, such an approach has been endorsed by the Obama administration.

It is premature to believe that the forthcoming direct bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang will bring about the resumption of the Six-Party Talks for the denuclearization of North Korea. Nevertheless, there are definitely merits for the engagement strategy seeking the resumption of the talks. As Paul B. Stares of the Council on Foreign Relations points out, as long as the talks are focused on denuclearization, North Korea will be denied formal recognition as a nuclear power.<sup>92</sup> In addition, if carefully conducted, multilateral talks could cap further nuclear weapons development. Moreover, the talks could lead to international inspections of nuclear sites in North Korea and possibly provide a “window” on North Korea. In short, a negotiated settlement with North Korea, either bilateral or multilateral, can slow down Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program. To be sure, if North Korea persists in its refusal to return to the Six-Party Talks for denuclearization or to give up its nuclear weapons program, there can be no doubt that the Obama administration will

enforce sanctions vigorously against North Korea. The U.S. is not going to accept a nuclear-armed North Korea, for such a compromise could most likely spell the end of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

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## Biographical Statement

Hong Nack Kim earned his Ph.D. at Georgetown University and is a professor of political science at West Virginia University. He was a visiting Fulbright Fellow at Keio University (1979, 1982) and Fulbright Professor of Political Science at Seoul National University (1990–91). Formerly editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Korean Studies*, he has contributed over 130 book chapters and articles to journals, including *Asian Survey*, *Pacific Affairs*, *Current History*, *World Politics*, *World Affairs*, and *Problems of Communism*. He has also authored or edited seven books, including *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (2006). He was a visiting POSCO Fellow at the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, in the fall of 2005. Currently he is chairman of the board of directors, International Council on Korean Studies, Washington, D.C.

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