

The North Korean Nuclear Threat

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On April 5, 2009, after months of much publicized preparations, North Korea launched an intercontinental ballistic missile, *Taepodong-2*. Despite the North Korean regime's claim that it was a rocket carrying satellite, the gambit inevitably provoked the condemnation of global society. With its national goal of becoming a *gangseongdaeguk* or "strong and prosperous nation" by 2012, nonetheless, Pyongyang dared the international denunciation, conducting a nuclear test on May 5, 2009.

Why did North Korea undertake such confrontational actions? Did North Korea actually intend to raise the security tension in the Northeast Asian region? Or, was North Korea unexpectedly pressed to escalate the strain of the regional security relations? To discuss such looming issues of the "North Korean Nuclear Threat," the East Asia Institute held its second Smart Talk on July 1, 2009, inviting Charles L. Pritchard, President of the Korea Economic Institute in Washington D.C. and former special envoy of the United States to North Korea. The Talk, with a number of prominent Korean experts on the issues, sought to identify what was driving North Korea to take such drastic measures. It tried to suggest some feasible policy recommendations in order to mitigate imminent conflict as well. In the Talk, in particular, Pritchard explained how North Korean leaders' miscalculations have led to the escalation of dissension, illustrating the ways in which vicious action-reaction cycles between Pyongyang and the international community evolved into the

second nuclear test. The discussion in the Talk concluded with the policy proposal that it is necessary to develop a more sophisticated approach including "exit strategy" to bring North Korea back to the negotiation table.

This report summarizes the presentation of Pritchard and the subsequent discussion with the participants at the Talk.

Presentation

North Korea's missile launch and nuclear test appear to be following a familiar pattern. But what we are witnessing is, in fact, something very different. We have seen a real lack of flexibility and something far more nationalistic in Pyongyang's move. The health of Kim Jong-il and the leadership succession are the key to understand this unconventional behavior. Primarily, the North Korean regime's recent provocative actions are geared more toward a domestic audience. The North Korean leadership needed to show off its strength and assure its control over the people. However, when it launched a ballistic missile in April, Pyongyang did not intend nor expect that a highly-tense situation would evolve. Unwittingly the North Korean leadership made a strategic miscalculation on the response from the United States and the international community.

Strategic Miscalculation 1: The United

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States' Tough Diplomacy

There has been a strategic miscalculation by North Korea in how it has interpreted the new Obama administration. The North Korean regime might have expected a softer and more liberal response from the Obama administration on its missile launch. But what Pyongyang faced was a far more conservative and tougher response than would have been expected from a Democratic president.

Although the Obama administration has been forced to act without having fully prepared itself, one thing was clear in its policy to North Korea. There was a strong feeling within the administration of being fed up with North Korea's provocative actions. The administration did not want to revive the exhaustive negotiating process of the Clinton administration nor to continue with the policies of the Bush administration's second term. Later it would blame the Bush administration for causing the current North Korean nuclear crisis by not implementing any substantial sanctions or offering any alternatives. The Bush administration only used rhetoric as it urged North Korea to abandon the nuclear program. By contrast, the Obama administration wants to be firm on the denuclearization of North Korea while being open to direct negotiations.

Secretary Hillary Clinton was another critical factor which led the United States reaction to be far more conservative. When North Korea launched its missile in April, Washington was not ready to deal with the North Korean threat. The Obama administration had not fully formed its North Korea team. Therefore, its policy responses have been mainly from the instincts of Secretary Clinton herself. She has proven to be far more conservative than Pyongyang would have ever

expected.

Strategic Miscalculation 2: Strong International Condemnation

When North Korea launched its *Taepodong-1* intermediate-range ballistic missile on August 31, 1998, it was confronted with strong criticism from global society. But the criticism was largely caused by the fact that Pyongyang had not given any official notice before the launch. The missile test then was not so much an issue of whether it was right or wrong but an issue of whether it violated appropriate protocols. If the North Korean regime had followed the appropriate procedures, it would have not needed to face such strong criticism. The same thing happened again when the North Korean leadership launched a *Taepodong-2* missile in 2006 for the first time. Again, North Korea was criticized for not making the proper notification before the missile test.

What followed with the missile launch in April 2009 was something new for North Korea. Before the launch, the North Korean regime made clear notifications about the test. It did not violate anything in the International Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation or the Missile Technology Control Regime. So, from the North Korean perspective, it did nothing wrong with its “peaceful satellite launch.” Considering also the limited international criticism of Iran's launching of a satellite in February 2009, Pyongyang did not expect any severe international condemnation.

However, it would transpire that the North Korean leadership had made another strategic miscalculation in regards to the international response. The April missile test brought about strong criticism from the international community as well as the United

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States. These strong reactions were then formalized when the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a presidential statement on April 13, condemning North Korea’s missile launch and calling for existing sanctions against Pyongyang to be more tightly enforced. It was apparent that there is a great difference in how North Korea perceives what it did and how the world perceives what it did.

North Korea’s Reaction: Nuclear Test

Since North Korea felt it had followed appropriate measures and had done nothing wrong, it was both confused and infuriated at the unanticipated strong criticism from the United States and global society. In response to the international condemnation including the United Nations Security Council’s presidential statement, the North Korean leadership remained defiant and countered with provocative statements. Pyongyang proceeded to expel United Nations inspectors who were monitoring the denuclearization of the Yongbyon nuclear facility. North Korea also declared that it would not attend the Six-Party Talks and threatened to reactivate its nuclear facilities.

Beyond these antagonistic actions, it was not just resentment but also fear that drove Pyongyang’s actions. Watching China and Russia join in the criticism of its missile test, North Korea felt vulnerable. This explains why the North Korea leadership decided to conduct its second nuclear test on May 25, 2009. An interview with a high-ranking North Korean diplomat confirmed the concerns beyond the nuclear test. Answering on a question why Pyongyang decided to conduct the test, he explained at first that the anger at the international condemnation triggered the nuclear test.

Pressed further he revealed that they felt vulnerable, and thus decided to conduct the nuclear test.

In a nutshell, the current North Korean nuclear crisis has been caused by an escalation of actions and reactions. At the first stage, North Korea’s strategic miscalculation of the United States and global society resulted in Pyongyang conducting the missile test. This action provoked severe condemnation from both the new Obama administration and the international community including China and Russia, the two strongest powers among Kim Jong-il’s few friends. The unexpected reaction from the world forced the North Korea regime to provocatively conduct its second nuclear test. This is how the crisis has escalated through an action-reaction process, resulting in a high level of tension in East Asia.

Need for an Exit Strategy

The potential for an escalation in conflict in East Asia remains very strong. The direction and tone of the Obama administration has already been established. It is clear that the Obama administration wants to change the behavior of North Korea, and will pursue tough diplomacy for denuclearization. The administration does not want to revive the exhaustive negotiating history of the last Democratic administration. The international community has agreed to issue United Nations Resolution 1874, strengthening sanctions against North Korea. If Pyongyang were to respond to the resolution in a defiant manner, then sanctions will very likely be toughened.

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little room for flexibility in decision-making. In the meantime, South Korea's Lee administration is confident with its tougher stance against North Korea and will not change the tone of its policy. A reflection of this is that South Korea's Defense Minister Lee Sanghee has recently given naval commanders autonomy to make their decisions without having to refer back to Seoul. Thus, over the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the potential for an escalation of not just hostilities but an actual conflict is very strong.

For peace and stability in East Asia, the dangers of these potential flashpoints needs to be recognized and another escalation of conflict should be prevented. More importantly, an 'exit strategy' to attract Pyongyang back to negotiations must be developed. This is something that would have to be done behind-the-scenes through closer cooperation with other parties. To develop a formal policy to North Korea, the Obama administration will reach an appropriate response within the administration, and consult the decision with its regional allies including South Korea and Japan. Then, it will talk with Beijing and Moscow before making its response formally to North Korea.

The United States has always wanted the negotiation process with North Korea to stay alive. It still wants the process to continue. But there has been no "return ramp" to induce North Korea back to negotiations. We should develop an "exit strategy" to convince North Korean regime to realize that there can be another path for its survival by returning to the negotiation table.

Discussion

Cause of the North Korean Nuclear Test

While participants agreed that what has driven North Korea's provocative behavior came from domestic factors, there was less of a consensus on whether the second nuclear test was the result of an actions and reactions. One discussant indicated that a nuclear test would have taken more than a year for North Korea to prepare, thus the test in May must have been prepared in advance, even before the start of Obama administration.

Another discussant noted that it is hard to say the nuclear test was a result of the action-reaction cycle alone. He explained that the combination of North Korea's tactical miscalculation and its intention together caused an escalation in tensions, and ultimately resulted in the second nuclear test. It is important to understand what was in North Korea's mind when it decided to conduct the nuclear test. And the best outcome for North Korea now is to be recognized as a nuclear weapons state. Demonstrating those points, the discussant inferred that Pyongyang wants to change the game. It now wants negotiations to focus on arms control issues rather than on the previous process of Complete, Irreversible and Verifiable Dismantlement of its nuclear facilities.

Pritchard reemphasized that it was the reactions from the United States and the international community that actually triggered North Korea's second nuclear test. He admitted that a nuclear test needs a long time to be prepared and that North Korea, hoping that would enhance the regime's leverage, had been preparing for a second nuclear test since its first nuclear test failed on October 26, 2006. However, he insisted that there was no reason to suggest that North Korea would have conducted a test in May, 2009, unless confronted with the unexpected criticism that it received from the United States and the United Nations

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regarding its rocket launch. He did though agree with the point that North Korea is trying to change the game, hoping the new talks would be concentrated on arms control, with the United States recognizing it as a nuclear weapons state. Still, he remained firm that the Obama administration cannot and will not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

The Obama Administration’s North Korea Policy

Drawing upon Pritchard’s insight and experience, the participants wanted to know what can be expected from the new North Korea team in the Obama administration. More specifically, some wanted to know what changes can be expected from the new team, considering that the defensive and conservative response during the initial period of the administration was from Secretary Clinton’s instincts.

Pritchard began by giving an insightful analysis into those key actors who will be dealing with Pyongyang. Kurt Campbell, recently sworn in as new Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, will not be playing the same role as his predecessor Christopher Hill. Campbell rather will be in line with Jim Steinberg, Deputy Secretary of State. They have worked together before and have a close relationship. Stephen Bosworth, Special Representative for North Korea Policy, will play the role Hill used to play. But the problem is that he does not have the same kind of influence or power as Hill had. Phillip Goldberg, former Ambassador to Bolivia, will be the administration’s point man on overseeing sanctions against North Korea. And Jeff Bader, Senior Director for Asian affairs on the National Security Council, and Gary Samore, White House Coordinator for Policy on Weapons of Mass Destruction, will also be playing

key roles. Attention needs to be paid on Stuart Levey, Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. He was the architect behind the Banco Delta Asia (BDA) sanctions effort and is one of the few Bush administration officials kept on by President Obama. He will be working to create a similar environment as the BDA case to facilitate negotiations.

Then, Pritchard suggested that there will not be a substantial shift in the administration’s policy to North Korea, because the administration has already established its tough diplomacy and upheld its principle toward denuclearization. The conservative characteristics of Secretary Clinton seem to be strengthened, and some of the administration’s key actors including Steinberg agree with the conservative tone. And Pritchard added that, even if the Obama administration wants to take on a softer tone, it cannot give what North Korea wants. For example, even if the administration is willing to recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, international legal obligations prevent it from doing so. United Nations Resolution 1874 clearly objects to recognition of North Korea as nuclear weapons state and refers to past resolutions that echoed this sentiment. Thus, it is clear that the Obama administration cannot and will not meet North Korea’s desires.

China: The Key to Resolving the North Korean Nuclear Threat

All the participants largely recognized that China is the key to resolving the North Korean nuclear threat. Without China’s support, any sanctions against North Korea will not succeed. So, it is important to understand whether China will become involved in the sanctions effort against Pyongyang, and, if so, in what conditions are involved. In the discus-

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sion, some believed that China will not abandon North Korea, while others upheld that China will support sanctions if Pyongyang’s actions cross Beijing’s “tipping-point.”

Pritchard outlined how China may evolve and adjust its policy on the North Korean regime. He explained that if China thinks the cost for supporting Pyongyang exceeds the potential risk for collapse of the North Korean regime, then it is possible that Beijing will shift its policy away from support for North Korea. He further clarified that the “tipping-point,” for China to allow sanctions against North Korea, would not be one single event. It would be rather a weakening over time of China’s threshold for Pyongyang. However, he added that if certain actions by North Korea would threaten its own economic growth and recovery from the current financial crisis, then we could expect China to accept, or to support at least, specific sanctions to North Korea. For example, with the BDA issue, China felt that the issue was detrimental to its banking system and would thus have negative consequences to its own economy, therefore Beijing did not appeal strongly to the United States.

The discussion then turned to the proposed Five-Party Talks. Mentioning the power game between the Foreign Ministry and the Chinese Communist Party’s International Liaison Department in China’s diplomacy, Pritchard noted that some Chinese officials have been warm to the idea of a Five-Party Talks. He also implied the possibility of China’s support to the Five-Party Talks by concluding that the importance is in how it would be packaged and presented. Some challenged with Pritchard’s expectation, emphasizing that, based on how China has responded so far, it is clear that China would never accept the Five-Party Talks.

A Strategy Beyond Sanctions

One discussant turned the conversation onto the topic of the post-sanctions strategy. He commented that North Korea will gain some benefit if it is able to hold out against the sanctions with China on its side. This is where the importance of the United States position on the post-sanction stage comes in. He asked what the United States’ plan would be in its aim of bringing North Korea to the negotiating table, in a post-sanctions environment. Prichard replied that the implementation of the sanctions will be a slow process, and it takes time for the impact of sanctions to be felt. For the post-sanctions stage, he noted, the agenda needs to be transformed and broadened.

Prichard went on to criticize the current negotiating process. “The Six-Party Talks in the current form is already dead. If the Talks are to be revived, it could be done on a similar form but in a different format.” He noted that, “During the Four-Party Talks that were held from 1997 to 1998, the format could be changed according to what was being discussed. It could be bilateral between the United States and North Korea or it could be multilateral including South Korea.” At some point in the future, he suggested, bilateral talks are inevitable. “They will be a face-saving measure for the North Koreans. However, the United States would only participate in bilateral talks if they would lead on to multilateral talks.”

Concluding the discussion on a strategy beyond sanctions, one participant commented that it is clear that the United States will be trying to change the behavior of North Korea, while still using “carrot-and-stick” approaches. As long as North Korea pursues its *songun chongchi* or “military-first” politics, he em-

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phasized, it will be very difficult for Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons. In this situation, he suggested, it would be better to talk about how we can help North Korea come back into the international community rather than just impose sanctions. Here lies the importance of the “coevolution” strategy as an alternative to sanctions.

Conclusion

The Talk underscored a number of insightful analyses on the North Korean threat, and left at least two questions on the table for further examination. First, while the participants agreed that the North Korean missile launch in April was driven by domestic political issues, there was less of a consensus on what triggered North Korea’s nuclear test in May. Pritchard presented that the escalation caused by action-reaction cycle ended up with the test. But many participants pointed out that Pyongyang’s intention to change the game is a critical reason for the test as well.

Second, although the participants largely recognized that China is the key to resolving the North Korean issue, the forum did not achieve a consensus on China’s consent to enforce sanctions. Some doubted the possibility of China’s willingness to abandon the North Korea regime, but others expected that Beijing may support sanctions if Pyongyang’s actions cross the “tipping-point.”

Finally, there was considerable agreement that a more sophisticated approach is needed to deal with North Korea. Pritchard concluded that an “exit strategy” should be provided to integrate North Korea back to the international community. Agreeing with Pritchard, the participants suggested that alternatives to sanctions, like “coevolution,” needs to be con-

sidered. ■

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