

How Comprehensive Is Comprehensive Enough?: Dealing with the North Korean Nuclear Problem

October 19, 2009

Chaesung Chun

The Final Deal with Kim Jong-il?

Sanctions against North Korea will realize the policy objectives of South Korea and other nations only when combined with feasible post-sanction plans for the next round of negotiations. International economic and diplomatic sanctions after North Korea's second nuclear test, which occurred on May 25, 2009, have been successful enough to make Kim Jong-il send gestures indicating a willingness to reengage in dialogue, mainly with Washington and partly with other participants in the Six-Party Talks, including Seoul. Issues are: How should the coming round of talks differ from the past ones? Should the Five Parties (that is, all those except North Korea) prepare a totally different package from the last one under the Six-Party Talks framework? Are there structural differences that will force Kim Jong-il to come to the negotiating table with new goals? Further, how comprehensive should the deal with North Korea really be? What kind of preparations will aid negotiators in finding the leverage to make progress on the problem posed by North Korea's nuclear program and to avoid a repetition of the past problem of rewarding the North's brinkmanship?

The so-called "grand bargain" of South Korea and the "comprehensive package deal" of the United States seem to emphasize the need to broaden the agenda of the negotiations in order to solve problems in a fundamental way. Eisenhower's maxim, "Whenever I run into a problem I can't solve, I always make it bigger"

may apply here, but the problem is what is meant by "comprehensive," given the failures of the Agreed Framework in 1994, the September 19th statement in 2005, and the February 14th action-for-action approach in 2007.

If we think of Kim Jong-il's intentions as the essential determinant, the North Korean nuclear problem is inherently a political question. Kim has attempted to create an international environment in which North Korea's current regime can survive with all its former socialist brethren fallen away. North Korea's repeated statements that it has developed nuclear weapons because of the United States' "anti-North Korea policy and aggressive nuclear strategy against the North" reflect Kim's political and international dilemma. Defining North Korea's nuclear problem as one of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) will not help solve the issue in any fundamental way. At issue is not just North Korean nuclear development but also North Korea itself or, more specifically, the problem of Kim Jong-il himself (Chun 2009).

As an Asia Security Initiative core institution, the East Asia Institute acknowledges the grant support from the MacArthur Foundation that made this research possible.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D, 310-68 Euljiro4-ga, Jung-gu,
Seoul 100-786, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.



After the so-called “redirecting” of South Korea’s North Korea policy by the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration, and with the advent of the more “balanced” Obama administration, Kim Jong-il’s gestures indicating a willingness to resume dialogue seem to have produced a new momentum. The coming dialogue will be a significant indication of Kim Jong-il’s current situation.

The 2009 Negotiations Will Be Different

First, time has become an increasingly important factor in determining how the story of North Korea’s nuclear game will end. Kim Jong-il’s health problems, despite his improved appearance of late, make obvious the clear limits to his period of governance. This limit constitutes the first difference in the coming stage of negotiations from previous ones. Kim Jong-il has also declared that by 2012, North Korea will begin to establish itself as a “strong and prosperous country.” Since then he has pressed the North Korean people to exert more effort to make this prediction come true, if only to counter his people’s judgment about the legitimacy of his rule and to put aside growing discontent about the aggravated economic situation. Kim’s repeated statements about North Korea’s optimistic future could be a self-fulfilling prophesy, but they could also be a self-destructing prophesy if Kim cannot fulfill North Koreans’ desire for a better life.

The succession process within the North Korean leadership, or at least the preparations for the succession, will determine not only the possibility of realizing a “strong and prosperous” North Korea but also the future of the Six-Party Talks. With no clear guarantee of the next leader’s ability to deal with tremendous domestic and diplomatic problems, Kim Jong-il may not want to pass on the highly difficult nuclear question. Kim’s decision will be a function of his evaluation of the next leader’s political and diplomatic ability, his predictions regarding North Korea’s economic situa-

tion and his people’s political attitude, and the content of the “grand” or “comprehensive” deal that will be suggested by neighboring countries. Whatever agreement is reached in 2009 will be highly affected by Kim Jong-il’s thinking about his ever more desperate domestic and personal situation.

Second, China’s importance in any dealings with North Korea has been repeatedly pointed out. Because of its own national interests, China has provided indispensable economic and diplomatic support to its neighbor. North Korea is China’s ally, valuable geographic buffer, and example that shows China’s loyalty and care for a neighboring country to the international community. However, China’s position may change: North Korea, with all its brinkmanship behavior, defies China’s range of protection; China, as a would-be global power, needs to establish itself as a norm-conforming state, which makes the alliance with the North increasingly untenable; and in the future China will be faced with additional serious North Korean problems such as the North’s next leadership and its economic difficulties. China seems to be at a crossroads where it must decide whether North Korea is a buffer or a burden. More important is that North Korea is sure to know that China’s strategic attitude toward it is changing, and that this change is likely to be structural and long-lasting rather than event-based. Beijing seems not to have fundamentally altered its position toward Pyongyang so far. Yet the possibility is growing that China will undertake a serious reconsideration of its policy toward North Korea, and may reorient its approach as a result.

Third, Kim Jong-il’s change of attitude from around June 2009 reflects the success of international sanctions. The United Nations (UN) has provided an effective venue for coherent international sanctions with broad participation of its member states; China and Russia have actively participated in the sanctions effort since North Korea’s nuclear tests; continuity from UN resolution 1718 has been demonstrated in the new resolution 1874; and sanctions have been ef-



fectively implemented in the financial area and in the case of North Korea's suspect ship the *Kang Nam* in June. At this point international sanctions against WMD-related economic transactions with North Korea will continue for a long time, which will put insurmountable pressure on Pyongyang.

Fourth, the Obama administration has been and will be maintaining a tough and resolute stance in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. Past experience in negotiating with North Korea in 1994 and 2005 set a basis against which future relations will be evaluated. Although major figures in the Obama administration have stated that North Korea's decision to completely dismantle its nuclear programs will bring about U.S. economic assistance, diplomatic normalization, and peaceful policies toward the North, there are strong prerequisites that North Korea will have to meet before these developments will be possible. A particular difficulty lies in the fact that both the United States and North Korea will need to resume the Six-Party Talks where the last round stalled, surrounding the issue of reporting and verification of the North's nuclear program. As we approach the moment of truth, when no more postponing based on incremental salami tactics is permitted, the tough position of Washington will continue. The domestic political situation of the Obama administration might be another factor as well. Decreasing approval ratings for the President will make the North Korean issue an area where any policy failure is not permissible and any strategic change can only be considered very cautiously.

The above four factors work to make the coming negotiations with North Korea all the more critical. However, there is also a fifth element that increases the situation's complexity. Conflicting national interests of countries that surround North Korea, especially China and Russia, may exist between the imperative to conform to the international norm of nonproliferation and the more realistic regional interest in maintaining good relations with North Korea. If the desire for positive relations wins out, then the commitment to inter-

national sanctions may weaken on the part of some of the North's neighbors. Because resolution 1874 concerns economic transactions regarding specific items such as weapons of mass destruction, debates may take place over the issue of whether a country's economic relations with North Korea violate resolution 1874.

All these factors—North Korea's domestic situation, international sanctions, and each country's changing strategy—make the coming negotiations different from the last ones, and these factors are structural rather than subject to short-term change. It is not certain which road Kim Jong-il will take in the future. But all involved need to bear these new factors in mind in pursuing a comprehensive deal.

Five-Party Consultation for What?

Uncertainty over how the North Korean nuclear crisis will end prompts surrounding countries to prepare for different foreseeable scenarios. Various Five-Party proposals regarding issues for negotiation may not be acceptable to North Korea, or the talks could drag on without producing any results. In that case, a multi-track approach is inevitable. However, if we attempt to solve problems through negotiations as one of the multi-track approaches, a proposal by the Five Parties seems worth trying from the perspective of Kim Jong-il. Recently, North Korea reacted to South Korea's proposal of the so-called "grand bargain" for the first time, in the newspaper *Rodong Shinmun* through a Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) article entitled "KCNA dismisses South Korean Chief Executive's 'proposal' as rubbish" on September 30. It argues that

The "Grand Bargain" is just a replica of the watchwords of "no nukes, opening and 3,000 dollars" that proved bankrupt in face of criticism of the public at home and abroad ... It was the U.S. that attempted to use nuclear weapons during the Korean war to eliminate the DPRK and it is again the U.S. that has waged ceaseless DPRK-targeted nuclear war exercises in the new century, too, after listing the DPRK as the target of its preemptive



nuclear attack. But for the U.S. persistent hostility and nuclear threat to the DPRK, the latter would not have been compelled to have access to nukes ... They are seriously mistaken if they calculate the DPRK would accept the ridiculous "proposal" for "the normalization of relations" with someone ... for [some] sort of "economic aid."

The message is clear and North Korea has repeated it endlessly, indicating that offers of "normalization of relations" and "economic aid" are not viewed as guaranteeing North Korea's survival and safety. Only "material" evidence that U.S. hostility has vanished will induce the North to change its strategic decisions. Its political objectives cannot be achieved through verbal, economic, or diplomatic means. Only military security, as indicated by the term "U.S. nuclear threat," will motivate Kim Jong-il to make a decision affecting his strategy toward the six parties and other nations.

This position has been reaffirmed in the results of the recent visit to Pyongyang by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Despite Wen's diplomatic support and economic assistance to North Korea even while it is under the weight of international sanctions, Kim Jong-il reportedly stated that North Korea would come back to multilateral talks, including the Six-Party Talks, only if these were preceded by bilateral dialogue with the United States. Furthermore, because denuclearization, in Kim's mind, touches upon the very life and death of himself and the regime, it is not negotiable at all in exchange for diplomatic or economic assistance.

In the future, Kim's choice may be one of the following: first, he may try to establish North Korea as a nuclear state and bequeath it to his heir, acquiring international recognition despite economic sanctions; second, he may make the fundamental strategic decision to dismantle all the North's nuclear programs and weapons if he has reliable assurances of the survival of the next leadership; or, third, he may keep the current stalemate going with the prospect that the next leadership will be better able to resolve the situation.

What will move Kim toward the option of dis-

mantlement by negotiation, and what will be the minimum requirements for a "comprehensive" package that Kim Jong-il will find acceptable? First, the United States, as the only superpower who can threaten North Korea's survivability and regime security, needs to confirm its genuine commitment to coexistence regarding North Korea's future status in the Northeast Asian security order. It is true that leaders in Washington have shown their intention to live with North Korea if the latter dismantles all its nuclear programs and weapons. However, without any foundation of mutual trust and material evidence for the future security of North Korea, the two countries remain divided by a classic security dilemma.

Second, the comprehensiveness of the negotiating agenda will matter. The September 19th statement in 2005 included various items seemingly related to the North Korean nuclear crisis, ranging from dismantlement, economic assistance, to a peace agreement, normalization of relations, and even regional security mechanisms, although the latter agendas were only indirectly related. These various agendas might seem comprehensive enough. However, North Korea will not be satisfied even with all these incentives if there is no security guarantee given to it that is complete and irreversible. North Korea has maintained that the withdrawal of the U.S. military forces in Korea, the denuclearization of the whole Korean Peninsula, and a change in the ROK-U.S. alliance are some of the requirements for meeting its political objectives. It is obvious that these options are inadmissible both to South Korea and to the United States. However, alternative guarantees in the areas of military and security matters need to be devised, such as enhancing military transparency, agreeing to some arms reduction, and setting up durable peace mechanisms.

Third, even when all these items and agendas are on the table for the North's benefit sequencing will be another tantalizing issue. North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons without ample evidence of the removal of hostilities on the U.S. side, which is entirely



unacceptable to the Five Parties. The action-for-action approach based on the February 14th agreement experimented with this possibility, only to prove that simultaneity is but another name for waiting for the other's first move.

South Korea's proposed "grand bargain" does not specify how to deal with these North Korean positions, either. The South Korean government shows some level of sympathy with North Korea's worries about its future, saying that the issue is "not just the North Korean nuclear problem, but the North Korean problem." A "grand bargain" is expected to touch upon a range of negotiation points that go beyond economic and diplomatic mechanisms in order to guarantee North Korea's survival. Still, the concept of a grand bargain needs to be much more developed. It needs to specify how to provide a security guarantee to North Korea on the basis of the Five Parties' cooperation. Such a bargain also needs to specify that North Korea's move for the complete dismantlement of nuclear programs should come first, before the South provides massive economic assistance. And it needs to specify plans for international coordination that will satisfy each country's strategic concerns.

Even less optimistic is the U.S. position, with its proposal for a so-called "package deal." In keeping with the concept of "strategic management," the U.S. government will be very cautious in beginning "direct" talks with Pyongyang, and will continue to rely on economic sanctions at the same time (Denmark et al. 2009). So that North Korea is not rewarded for brinkmanship, the United States will need to require the complete and irreversible dismantlement of the North's nuclear program as a basic first step. It is true that the Obama administration is more aggressive in dealing with North Korea through the inclusion of incentives such as large-scale economic assistance, diplomatic normalization, and a peace treaty. However, because of the security dilemma and lack of mutual trust, any work toward a comprehensive agenda will be hindered by the issue of sequencing.

China is faced with a North Korean dilemma, as already described. North Korea, as a physical buffer and past partner, gives China a chance to work as a mediator on difficult issues. However, China's enhanced international status and its responsibility to the norm of nonproliferation have enlarged the strategic discrepancy between itself and North Korea. Like the United States, China must be cautious in any agreements involving a comprehensive deal that might change the future strategic orientation of North Korea. Similarly, China cannot expect fundamental transformations through regime change there.

Russia and Japan will continue to be significant players in providing North Korea with future economic and diplomatic assistance, and may provide inputs to the architecture of a comprehensive deal among the Six Parties. Russia, as the presiding country of the Six-Party Talks Working Group for regional security mechanisms, may search for a new chance to raise its voice. Japan's new government, under the Democratic Party of Japan will perform a bottom-up review of its Asian policy based on "fraternity," which might make its North Korean policy more progressive.

It is not certain that the Five Parties will agree to an assumed threshold of minimum requirements for comprehensiveness for the coming negotiation. If they don't, Kim Jong-il will continue to try to establish North Korea as a nuclear state, which the next leader will inherit as Kim Jong-il's last instructions. Even if the Five Parties sympathize with Kim Jong-il's desire for a minimum requirement of comprehensiveness, there still remain the problem of how to make these conditions operational and how to be certain of the denuclearization of North Korea. If there is a way to agree to a minimum threshold of comprehensiveness, and a way to implement the plan while avoiding the problems of sequencing and of verification of the North's denuclearization, then solving the North Korean nuclear crisis through negotiation may be possible.



Making a Comprehensive Deal Workable

To make the comprehensive or grand deal work, the following things must be considered.

Five-Party consultation for a bigger picture. The end-state of North Korea's nuclear crisis will be the situation in which the political and strategic orientations of the Six Parties are negotiated or coordinated, either through effective dialogue or a high level of sanctions and pressure, or contingencies. The political nature of the crisis does not permit a solely technical solution, focusing on denuclearization or nonproliferation. The Five Parties must talk about a future North Korea that they strategically prefer, their own plan for the future of the Korean Peninsula, or even the future order of Northeast Asia, which will include each country's regional strategy, views about existing alliances, and strategic relations with each other. Obviously these sensitive issues cannot always be dealt with at the governmental level. We need a network of track I or track II dialogues among the Five Parties. We need more diverse formats and agendas at various levels, such as bilateral, trilateral, and regional dialogues.

More effective political disincentives for North Korea. As Goethe noted, fear and desire are two factors that move human minds. Without fear of sanctions, Kim Jong-il will not be interested in adjusting to the incentives given to him by the international community. International economic sanctions, however, are not sufficient. Because of the extraordinary features of the regime, hurting ordinary North Korean people will not weaken Kim's regime itself to any great extent. Sanctions targeted only at North Koreans in the end will not motivate Kim to adjust to negotiating conditions. What Kim Jong-il fears is the sanctions that may affect the survivability and stability of his regime and the regime of his successors. Political disincentives or sanctions such as inattention to North Korea leading to decreasing assistance, closely coordinated Five-

Party plans for political contingencies, and empowering reform-minded North Korean factions will be more threatening to Kim Jong-il. Two points are important here. We need to control the level of political sanctions sensitively in order to be effective but not to pressure Kim so much that he loses interest in the dialogue. China will be especially important in pressuring and persuading North Korea. Political sanctions need to be implemented indirectly to Kim Jong-il through very sensitive speech acts composed of statements, concepts, and discourse. Information relayed to Kim about what the Five Parties are planning for the future of Korea will also be an important influence.

Political signaling through economic assistance. Stronger and more effective disincentives will bear fruit with well-devised incentives. Economic and diplomatic incentives for complete and irreversible dismantlement of North Korean nuclear programs have at best very limited effects if they do not touch upon the political nature of the problem. Incentives, like sanctions, need to target the political concerns of Kim Jong-il. What should be delivered through economic incentives is not a quantity of economic assistance or a hidden intention to lead North Korea to the road of opening and reform. The correct signal is that international community desires the survival of post-nuclear North Korea. This approach will lead to a different composition of economic assistance packages. These will include more long-term items such as building infrastructure and educational programs. If we also predict that the Northeast Asian region will include a North Korea that assumes a certain role, this will require strategic reorientation of the Five Parties to some degree. New economic packages tie some hands in terms of commitments made, which may include domestic "audience costs" for the Five Parties. Only with somewhat costly commitments of the Five Parties to political incentives for North Korea will the North increase its trust of the giver (Fearon 1997).



High(est) level of deal. Too much unproductive effort has been devoted to discussion of who moves first in action-for-action negotiation. Questions about sequencing and procedural agendas have proved unsolvable without higher strategic decisions. Strategic security dilemmas affecting every tactical move for each side have accumulated the sense of betrayal and distrust. Only higher-level negotiations among the Six Parties or, for the time being, bilateral or trilateral negotiations will make a difference. For the success of higher-level negotiations, a series of pre-negotiations will be crucial. However, on the basis of the recent effectiveness of political sanctions, speech acts and political signaling from North Korea, and the expectation of a higher level of meeting that will represent a more genuine political intention, we may expect Kim Jong-il to make a strategic decision to completely dismantle all nuclear programs.

New strategic orientation of North Korea. A complete dismantlement of nuclear programs and weapons will not be sufficient for the future survivability of North Korea. A denuclearized North Korea will be only the first step for its future normalization. The North will have to decide if it wants to proceed with a program of opening and reform. However, the diplomatic and strategic trajectory of North Korea after denuclearization will be of grave concern to surrounding countries. North Korea should make clear what kind of strategic relations it will establish with others. Conformity to international norms that every state cherishes will be the most important factor in guaranteeing North Korea's future. North Korea's involvement in, for example, counter-terrorism, environmental protection, or regional multilateral dialogue will be helpful for its own interests.

Preparations for a multi-track approach are necessary. Arguments so far depend on the maxim of President Eisenhower that "making the question bigger" will help solve the problem. However, if Kim Jong-il

refuses to participate in this more fundamental format of negotiation for whatever reason, it will not work. He might be skeptical about Five Parties' genuine intention, his own country's domestic political and economic stability, or regime survivability after denuclearization. For now, it might be best to bear in mind that we need to think of other approaches and cope with contingencies if the coming negotiations do not work.■

——— *Chaesung Chun* is the Chair of the Asia Security Initiative at the East Asia Institute and an associate professor in the Department of International Relations at Seoul National University.

Acknowledgments

I appreciate the helpful comments of Young-Sun Ha, Sook-Jong Lee, Byung-Kook Kim, Min Gyo Koo, Jung Kim, and Ha-jeong Kim.

References

- Chun, Chaesung. 2009. "Moving from a North Korean Nuclear Problem to the Problem of North Korea." *East Asia Institute Issue Briefing* No. MASI 2009-03.
- Denmark, Abraham M., Nirav Patel, Lindsey Ford, Michael Zubrow, and Zachary M. Hosford. 2009. *No Illusions: Regaining the Strategic Initiative with North Korea*. Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security.
- Fearon, James D. 1997. "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, 1: 68-90.

