

Prospects for the North Korean Nuclear Crisis after the Missile Test

March 6, 2009

The Future of North
Korea Panel

Young Sun Ha, Chair

Chaesung Chun
Ji Hwan Hwang
Dongho Jo
Ho Jae Kang
Soo Am Kim
Seong Ji Woo

This product presents a
policy-oriented
summary of the Future
of North Korea Research
Panel monthly seminar.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
310-68 Euljiro 4-ga
Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2009

www.eai.or.kr

North Korean Nuclear Problem after the Missile Test

The current North Korean nuclear crisis is in deadlock. Although there was some progress made during the second term of the Bush Administration, there is little reason to feel optimistic about the future. The current impasse is centered on making progress towards the third phase as set out in the Feb. 13th agreement reached through the Six-Party Talks. In the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks on 19th September, 2005, the principle “action for action” was outlined as the format for implementing the agreed phased actions.

This process includes three main phases to resolve the crisis. To date, the First and Second Phases of the agreement are being finalized, going through the stage of the “dismantlement with full report and verification” of its nuclear program. This is what was agreed to in the Six-Party Talks’ “Initial Actions Agreement” on 13 February, 2007. But even if progress was made in completing the Second Phase of “complete and correct” declaration, the Third Phase will be the main challenge to fully resolving the crisis. While the first two phases puts the breaks on North Korea’s nuclear program, the Third Phase requires full denuclearization in a “verifiable and complete manner”.

With North Korea stalling on this part of the agreement and the U.S. insisting on denuclearization, it will be hard to see this resolved. Based upon the “action for action”

principle, one side can’t move without the other’s satisfactory reciprocal action. This makes it difficult to make a strategic decision on the delicate and sensitive Third Phase, especially for North Korea desperately in need of regime security.

In resolving this stalemate, it had been expected that with the election of President Obama and the new administration, there would be a fundamental renewal and improvement in U.S.-North Korean relations. Certainly this was North Korea’s initial hope. But upon examination of statements and comments by the new administration, we wonder if there will be any change from the Bush administration’s policies towards North Korea. Although the Obama administration is currently reviewing its North Korea policy, we can expect that they will be working from the foundations laid by former Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill during the Bush administration’s second term. Ambassador Stephen J. Bosworth, the newly appointed Special Representative for North Korea Policy, mentioned that in regard to North Korea “the fundamental goal of the United States remains unchanged.”

Consequences of the North Korean Missile Test for South Korea

With the launch of the long-range missile which North Korea claimed was the “launch of a satellite” on April, 5, attention now should focus on the reaction of major powers,

“Upon the resumption of negotiations, we can then expect the U.S. to exert more pressure on North Korea and raise the level of results expected.”

international society and the United Nations to this provocation.

What options are there for South Korea? If we go back to the last major incident which was the nuclear test and the failed launch of a Taepodong II missile in 2006, South Korea's response was more of a formality than actual criticism. It failed to take any lead in that crisis.

The reaction the American, Chinese, Japanese and North Korean sides gave over the missile test was expected. So South Korea should strongly consider the kind of policy response it will pursue, which should not just be a formality like the last time. South Korea needs to seriously think about what kind of role it can play in this crisis. It will be vital that it shows some kind of initiative or it faces the genuine prospect of being marginalized in its efforts to resolve the crisis.

Looking ahead, South Korea should consider the following scenarios and determine what kind of influential and meaningful position it will take.

Scenarios Following the Missile Test

Scenario 1_ Negotiations Breakdown

The U.S. position on the missile test was strong. It vehemently opposed the testing of any missile. Therefore, we can see that this will make continued negotiations difficult. In this scenario, we will see some breakdown in talks between the two sides. In such a case, it will be difficult if not impossible to move on into the Third Phase.

Scenario 2_ Negotiations Eventually Resume

If we look back to the first nuclear crisis in 1993-94, we saw how the situation deteriorated but eventually stabilized allowing for bilateral and multilateral negotiations to resume. Following this current crisis, we can expect that the U.S. will over time grudgingly resume negotiations once the situation has eased.

Upon the resumption of negotiations, we can then expect the U.S. to exert more pressure on North Korea and raise the level of results expected. Through its actions, North Korea is trying to increase the pressure and is hoping to acquire the ultimate “package deal” from the U.S. in exchange for full denuclearization. In this situation, North-South Korean relations can improve in resolving the crisis and it will be vital that policy makers take up this opportunity.

Scenario 3_ No Impact on Negotiations

By launching its missile and raising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, as seen recently by the threats to civilian airliners, North Korea is hoping to gain a stronger position in its negotiations. However the result it expects may not come about. Its actions have not had an impact on U.S.-ROK relations in the way that it had hoped and the U.S. is not likely to respond to North Korea's gestures. In such a case, North Korea has seriously misjudged the U.S.

This thinking is based on the fact that the U.S. tends to follow its own logic in dealing with North Korea. If it wishes to negotiate, it will; if not, it will pull away from the table but its decisions will not be influenced by North Korea's actions. This is a strong characteristic of U.S. foreign policy. As a matter of fact,

Secretary of State Hilary Clinton mentioned that "it is important to recognize that the North Koreans entered into obligations regarding denuclearization that we intend to try to hold them to, and that is something we're going to do regardless of what ... they may or may not launch in the future." The issue, then, is whether there will be another, more effective provocation that North Korea can adopt to draw the US to the negotiation table.

"We can expect that the Obama administration will be pursuing all channels of dialogue and negotiation with North Korea; single channel, bilateral, multilateral to achieve the desired goal of denuclearization."

Going Forward: The Obama Administration's North Korea Policy

The Obama administration seems to be currently reviewing its policy on North Korea, but it has to hit the ground running. North Korea is not allowing the new administration time to consider what will be the best option. We can expect that the Obama administration will be pursuing all channels of dialogue and negotiation with North Korea; single channel, bilateral, multilateral to achieve the desired goal of denuclearization. This is in line with much of the new administration's broad foreign policy in using all tools available to the task.

One notable shift that we have seen with regard to its North Korea policy is the change in language. The language used is often a strong indicator of the direction that a new administration will go in its foreign policy. The Obama administration's initial stance of "direct and tough" approach has now become just a "tough" approach as State Secretary Clinton has shown in her recent Asian visit. ■