

Smart Talk No. 5

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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Four Scenarios for a Nuclear North Korea

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The issue of resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis is one of the most protracted and difficult issues facing the Obama administration with no clear end in sight. Negotiations whether bilateral or multilateral, have both been frustrated at different stages and levels. Looking toward the future and taking in a long-term perspective, how the North Korean nuclear crisis will be resolved is one of the key challenges for the United States and the countries in the region when negotiating with Pyongyang.

In order to formulate discussion on the policies for the future of North Korea, Joel Wit (Weatherhead East Asia Institute, Columbia University) was invited to the 5th Smart Talk to present on “Four Scenarios for a Nuclear North Korea.” These scenarios range from the most optimistic to the most pessimistic outlooks. In presenting these scenarios, a number of questions set out the Talk on the future perspective for the nuclear crisis. What are the major issues affecting dialogue with North Korea? Would the United States opt for containment policies over direct engagement? What would be the process for containment or engagement? Finally, what is the current political environment in Washington toward Pyongyang?

The 5th Smart Talk brought together Joel Wit with a number of prominent scholars from South Korea and abroad to develop ideas on these issues and address policy recommendations on dealing with North Korea. After Wit presented his four scenarios, the panel

moderated by Professor Young-Sun Ha (Seoul National University) debated the issues raised. The following is a summary of the main presentation followed by the discussion.

Presentation

The following four scenarios present the future paths for nuclear North Korea and possible policy responses by the United States, its allies, and other countries in the region.

Scenario I: Denuclearization Agreement Reached

This is the most optimistic outcome of the current deadlock. In this scenario, the international community lives with a nuclear North Korea but there is a successful dialogue process and outcome. At the end of this process, Pyongyang will denuclearize as agreed through negotiations. Of all the probable scenarios, this is the best outcome. A sudden or a rapid denuclearization is unlikely to happen. Key to this scenario is a durable agreement that follows phases of engagement. Part of this process also involves a transformational approach rather than a transactional one. This transformational approach is about a change in the political relations between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and United States dealing with sensitive issues such as survival of the regime and recognizing the sovereignty of the DPRK.

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The issue of extended deterrence will be a major factor in achieving success. It has long been North Korea’s position to oppose extended deterrence and this is unlikely to change. However, the United States will not give up its extended deterrence for its two main allies South Korea and Japan. Therefore, in what ways could an agreement be found? If North Korea were to denuclearize, a peace agreement was achieved on the Korean Peninsula, and Pyongyang’s relations with other countries, particularly Japan, were improved then it would create a positive environment. In this environment, the United States could look at redefining extended deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea.

The other sticking point between the United States and North Korea is the stationing of troops in South Korea. It is clear the United States would never consider it acceptable to withdraw its forces completely. One possible solution would be to change the role of U.S. Forces in Korea to emphasize other duties. During negotiations in the 1990s, North Korea was willing to accept the presence of U.S. Forces in Korea and these negotiations looked at what role these forces could play in the future on the Korean Peninsula.

Scenario II: Negotiations Drag On Without Final Agreement

This scenario reflects the current situation. Negotiations will take a step forward and a step back. There will be achievements without full realization as well as periodic setbacks. Because of the difficulties in achieving any

breakthrough, limited agreements will be reached to keep the momentum going. In this kind of situation, it will always be hard to say where progress has been made.

All countries involved will pursue “hedging strategies” in the event that talks will collapse. While North Korea will conduct nuclear activities, the “hedging strategies” of the other countries will mainly consist of diplomatic maneuvers. The United States diplomatic strategy will be more trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea while it will also develop closer ties with China and work more through the United Nations. South Korea will put pressure on North Korea through inter-Korean relations where it will increasingly tie progress in denuclearization to economic assistance. Limited progress in negotiations would push Japan to focus more on the issue of the Japanese abductees in North Korea with Pyongyang. China would do all it can to prevent talks from collapsing which would include resolving any stalemates in negotiations. Beijing would also work closely with other countries in the region, like South Korea

Scenario III: Negotiations Collapse

This is not the sudden collapse of negotiations but rather a long drawn-out process of talks fading out. Scenario III could be the outcome of the second scenario where the United States is unwilling to continue on with talks indefinitely. It is also possible that in this scenario the two sides withdraw from negotiations in order to bolster their positions before resuming talks.

In the event of negotiations collapsing, the United States will seek to contain North Korea and Pyongyang will seek to build up its nuclear arsenal. There will be containment

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“hedging strategies” by all sides. However, these strategies will be different depending on the country. The United States will likely bolster extended deterrence through redeploying tactical nuclear weapons in the Pacific theatre and the acceleration of non-nuclear activities such as missile defense. Additionally, it will also look at contingencies for air strike capabilities against North Korea’s nuclear facilities. Pyongyang will restart activities at the Yongbyon nuclear facility and enhance its nuclear and missile capabilities. Both South Korea and Japan will look at improving their own strike capabilities such as deploying cruise missiles and possibly utilizing missile defense systems. China, on the other hand, will seek diplomatic strategies as they try to keep negotiations going and avoid instability on the Korean Peninsula.

There are many problems to this scenario. Firstly, it is impossible to determine what each country’s intentions will be. Secondly, it is difficult to see how long this kind of scenario can be maintained. Coupled with that is the fragile situation of how to reconcile the differences in patience toward Pyongyang in Beijing and Washington.

Contrary to some expectations, this scenario will not lead to the pursuit of nuclear weapons by countries in the region. However, in this scenario, the national debates in countries like Japan on restraint of nuclear weapons development will be hampered. There will be a general negative impact from the collapse of negotiations on the region. With the United States, Japan, and South Korea pursuing containment “hedging strategies,” China itself will feel increasingly threatened by this buildup. This in turn will disrupt future dialogue with Beijing that will be important in solving global challenges. Regardless of the outcome in this scenario, the United States

will not be resigned to accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapon state.

Scenario IV: Nuclear North Korea Collapses

This is the worst outcome. The greatest threat from this scenario where a nuclear-armed North Korea collapses is the capability of countries like the United States to secure Pyongyang’s stockpile of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). While there are many operation plans and scenarios for this outcome, lessons from Iraq show the difficulty in knowing exactly where WMDs are stored. In this kind of end-scenario, prior operation plans are usually found out to be the least successful. Planning policies based on an expected collapse of North Korea are unlikely to succeed.

This worst case scenario requires hedging against collapse and the development of “beachheads” of cooperation. This involves building up prior cooperation with Pyongyang in the event of future contingencies. Such cooperation will allow for the United States and other countries to be in a better position were North Korea to collapse.

Discussion

Seeking a Policy Response: Containment or dialogue?

The four scenarios presented by Joel Wit offer different perspectives on how the United States and other countries could approach nuclear North Korea. Scenario I shows the positive results from active engagement and dialogue resulting in an agreement to denuclearize. By contrast, Scenario III shows the use of containment to resolve the North Korean

“Containment will not reverse the development of its nuclear arsenal, nor will it prevent proliferation. The few cases of shipments being seized does not bode well for an active counter-proliferation effort.”

nuclear crisis. In presenting these two approaches, Kang Choi wanted to know about Wit’s policy recommendation in handling the current crisis. In particular, he wanted to know if containment would be a policy option.

Wit was strongly against containment as a solution to the nuclear crisis. While he accepted that sanctions against North Korea following the nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 were necessary and welcomed, containment is a different story. He believed that the effects of containment on North Korea would be very limited. Containment will not reverse the development of its nuclear arsenal, nor will it prevent proliferation. The few cases of shipments being seized does not bode well for an active counter-proliferation effort and represents only the tip of the iceberg of North Korea’s proliferation activities. Wit also pointed out that there has been a great deal of discussion arguing that sanctions were having an economic impact on Pyongyang, but he disagreed with these views. Going by assessments of long-time visitors to North Korea who know the country well, there does not appear to be a major impact from sanctions. This would appear to tell the story that Pyongyang will not respond to economic incentives or that somehow North Korea could be “bought off.”

Responding to other suggestions by Kang Choi on different forms of engagement like “hawk engagement” or a hybrid form of containment and engagement, Wit disagreed with such ideas as being something new. He referred back to during the first nuclear crisis in 1994 and suggested it was no different than what had been attempted before. The simultaneous engagement while making preparations to launch an air strike on the Yongbyon nuclear facility under the Clinton administration is an example of a policy using both contain-

ment and engagement.

Wit supports a policy of engagement, dialogue, and positive barriers to bad behavior. He believed that a step-by-step process with a meaningful approach can lead to a successful outcome. This would not take the form of a unilateral concession but rather unilateral confidence building measures (CBM). Some of these CBM steps could include loosening of visa regulations for DPRK citizens entering the United States for a North Korean moratorium on nuclear testing.

Stability of the North Korean Regime

Paramount to any resolution of the nuclear issue and the future of North Korea is the stability of the regime. Wit explained that in any scenario, the looming threat of the collapse of North Korea is a major concern that has to be prepared for. However, Kang Choi disagreed with the perception that collapse can happen in the first scenario because of the role of China and other regional powers in any resolution. This would mean that in scenarios II, III, and IV preparations are needed for the possible collapse of North Korea and how it should be dealt with is the critical question.

Central to the foundations of the stability of the regime is the question of succession. This factor can affect the outcome of any negotiation. Wit put forward the explanation that a new leader in North Korea will begin with a tough approach and will likely be more inward-focused. Kim Jong-il’s successor will likely be constrained by many domestic forces including the military. Such a leader will not have the freedom to make dramatic changes or reforms. Instead, the new leader will have to become more hard-line in order to build up a stronger credibility. Therefore, negotiating with Kim Jong-il now is more likely to bring

about a resolution than waiting for succession and a new leadership.

The Impact of United States' Domestic Politics

An important yet highly complex factor for each scenario is the domestic political situation. The domestic politics in Washington can affect the outcome of engagement and negotiations. While the current administration is going through many difficulties with the health care bill, the underlying worry for Democrats is criticism from the Republicans on foreign policy.

Wit put across four points he believed were political factors influencing the United States: 1) *Slap in the face*: There is a strong feeling in the Obama administration that when they came to power and offered talks, North Korea slapped them in the face with its actions in Spring, 2009. Many officials in the Obama administration took that very personally and this sentiment has influenced their thinking to North Korea. 2) *No winning argument*: Currently the domestic debate on engagement to North Korea is hampered by pessimism, exacerbation, and a general lack of enthusiasm toward Pyongyang. It is difficult to present a winning argument on positive engagement with the North Korean regime. 3) *Anything but Bush/Hill*: It is the view of the Obama administration that the past administration's efforts on North Korea amounted to little. Particularly with Christopher Hill, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, there is the view that he handled the situation wrongly. Many believe that Hill neglected allies in the region while responding too much to North Korean demands. The Obama administration's Special Representative on North Korea Policy, Ste-

phen Bosworth, is taking a very different approach from Hill. 4) *Consensus in decision making*: It is wrong to believe that North Korea is low down on the list of priorities for the Obama administration. Rather, current efforts reflect the slow process of how the administration reaches decisions. This process requires a general consensus before approaches are made to North Korea.

Combined together, these factors present an administration that is fed up with North Korea and is seeking to develop a different approach from the Bush administration. With this difficulty in the domestic politics in the United States, Wit was keen to emphasize the need for a durable approach in developing a policy. This durable approach should also include all areas toward North Korea, such as missiles, peace agreement, human rights, and proliferation. Wit did remain optimistic about the chances of success for the current administration, which has now a possible eight-year window of opportunity to achieve results.

Conclusion

The approach to North Korea should be a positive engagement that evolves from a durable process. This effort should not wait to deal with a new leadership in Pyongyang after Kim Jong-il. Wit stated that the new leadership will not be reform-minded and this will make any resolution of the crisis more difficult. Therefore it will be more effective and easier to conclude a deal now with Kim Jong-il. Wit's recommendations on approaches to North Korea highlight some of the difficulties ahead but the opportunities are there, particularly with a new administration in Washington. In presenting his four scenarios on the long-term prospects for resolving the North Korean nuc-

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lear crisis, Wit was seeking to stir debate and thought about future efforts rather than current ones. Two key factors will shape the resolution of the nuclear issue. The first is the stability of the regime in North Korea and the second is the political situation in the United States. Both are hard to determine and identify as to which direction they are heading. To cope with these difficulties, Wit suggested that any engagement with North Korea must be supported by a strong underlying political base that is durable and concluded before leadership succession in Pyongyang complicates reaching an agreement. Above all, this approach will require innovative thinking on devising new negotiating strategies, particularly on the tough and sensitive issues like proliferation and human rights. In this way, solutions to the North Korean nuclear crisis can be found and result in a more optimistic future.■

Discussants

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