

Smart Talk No. 6

Presenter

L. Gordon Flake

Moderator

Chaesung Chun

Discussants

Seongwhun Cheon
Kang Choi
Jihwan Hwang

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

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

© EAI 2010

www.eai.or.kr

Summitry and the Six-Party Talks: U.S. Policy toward North Korea

February 23, 2010

The current deadlock in the Six-Party Talks makes the resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis a more difficult task. While resuming the Six-Party Talks is a key objective for the participants, restarting U.S. dialogue with North Korea remains the first step. In its first year in office, the Obama administration has faced numerous provocations from Pyongyang as it has struggled to assert a policy toward North Korea. With Stephen Bosworth leading the administration policy toward North Korea and Kurt Campbell overseeing the State Department's role, understanding what the Obama administration's North Korea policy is will be critical in addressing the future course of the crisis and its outcome.

The East Asia Institute (EAI) invited prominent Korea expert L. Gordon Flake, executive director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation on February 23, 2010, to assess Washington's policy toward North Korea. Together with leading experts from South Korea, he outlined the current approach of the Obama administration and contrasted it with the Bush administration.

The missile test and subsequent nuclear test in April and May 2009 respectively, put the Obama administration in a difficult position from the start. Yet the circumstances were different from previous provocations by Pyongyang. Some have argued that the Obama administration should respond with new deals and comprehensive packages, while others have argued for strong and tougher approaches. What has emerged has been some-

thing different from the Bush administration. However, it has yet to achieve any meaningful results. In his presentation, Mr. Flake addresses the many pressing questions surrounding Washington's policy toward North Korea. How has the Obama administration's approach differed from the Bush administration? Has the Obama administration been able to effectively coordinate its approaches with regional partners, South Korea and Japan? And correspondingly, how has it worked with China and Russia? What role will the Six-Party Talks play under the Obama administration considering that it is in deadlock?

The following is a summary of L. Gordon Flake's presentation and the discussion that followed.

Presentation

Pursuit of Multilateral Diplomacy toward North Korea

The Obama administration's foreign policy primarily rests on the core ideas of multilateralism and diplomacy. These principles have been visibly applied by Washington to resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. In contrast to the early period of the Bush administration that explicitly denied direct negotiations with states classified as the "axis of evil" including North Korea, President Obama has explicitly pursued multilateral coordination and tough diplomacy to compel Pyongyang to

“The Obama administration’s political efforts toward close prior consultation and coordination with allies in the North Korean nuclear crisis represent its shift in foreign policy.”

give up its nuclear weapons program. The Obama administration’s political efforts toward close prior consultation and coordination with allies in the North Korean nuclear crisis largely represent this shift in U.S. foreign policy. This can be clearly seen in the diverging strategies of Stephen Bosworth, Special Representative for North Korea Policy under the Obama administration from those of Christopher Hill, Former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Bush administration in dealing with the growing nuclear ambitions of Pyongyang. Many experts shared the assessment that Hill pushed for direct negotiations with the North lacking a sufficient level of prior consultation and policy coordination with U.S. allies, whereas Bosworth primarily went through close consultation with its partners before negotiating with the North. Given the Obama administration’s focus on multilateral collaboration toward the goal of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the Six-Party Talks are believed to be the most workable as well as desirable policy choice among the parties to the talks, which include China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

Development of a Northeast Asia Policy rather than a North Korea Policy

In analyzing President Obama’s regional policy in Northeast Asia at a broader level, it can be carefully argued that the Obama administration is pursuing more of a Northeast Asia policy rather than a North Korea policy itself. Mr. Flake shared his assessment that the critical national interests of the United States in the region are not confined to North Korean problems. Rather, peace, stability, and economic progress in the regional as well as bilateral relationships of the United States with

China, Russia, and South Korea are more crucial factors in calculating Washington’s strategic interests in Northeast Asia. Accordingly, this pragmatic and realistic assumption of the Obama administration aims to constrain Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions as part of its strategic effort to ensure that the escalating nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula do not damage the promotion of broader U.S. interests in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

Positive Aspects of President Obama’s Policy toward North Korea

Despite the current impasse in the nuclear crisis, Mr. Flake pointed out that the Obama administration has been successful in its handling of the North Korean nuclear issue. Although he termed this “success without progress” in that its primary manifestations were policy coordination and avoiding worse-case scenarios. Most importantly, the United States has greatly invested its political resources toward trust building with its allies, particularly South Korea and Japan. With the unprecedentedly increasing level of communication at the working level with Seoul and Tokyo in recent years, the Obama administration has pursued a coordinated and cooperative approach based on mutual trust. Amid a careful prediction on the possibility of a summit meeting between the two Koreas, policymakers in both Seoul and Washington share a rather optimistic view that an inter-Korean summit can possibly reflect their common interests and mutual trust in peacefully resolving the nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula.

Second, Mr. Flake opined that the Obama administration has been more successful at implementing meaningful economic sanctions

“The Obama administration has been more successful at implementing meaningful economic sanctions and coordinated pressure on North Korea in one year than the Bush administration had done in eight years.”

and coordinated pressure on North Korea in one year than the Bush administration had done in eight years, despite the Bush Administration’s harsh rhetoric. According to Mr. Flake’s review of President Obama’s first year in office, he strongly supported the current administration’s idea that effective economic sanctions against North Korea can only be maximized when the other parties to the talks are convinced that the United States is equally committed to diplomacy rather than the sole use of coercive means. This carefully coordinated emphasis on diplomacy in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue will effectively magnify international pressure on North Korea to return to the talks as well as to unilaterally abandon its nuclear arsenal.

Another notable aspect of the Obama administration’s policy toward the North Korean regime is its continuity. In contrast to the policy fluctuations of the Clinton and Bush administrations, the Obama administration has maintained consistency in its handling of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program while coping with Pyongyang’s escalating nuclear brinkmanship. Facing the growing emphasis on tougher diplomacy in Washington against the states that seek nuclear acquisition outside the framework of the nonproliferation regime such as North Korea and Iran, Pyongyang appears to lack a coherent policy in pursuing its nuclear ambitions repeating a visible pattern of provocation and compromise under the increasing domestic pressures on regime survival. The consistent policy of tough diplomacy toward North Korea is considered a key to effectively compel Pyongyang to adhere to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Limitations of President Obama’s Policy toward North Korea

It has been widely agreed that there is no immediate solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis that has been a source of instability and uncertainty in the region. The international nonproliferation regime is perceived to lack any effective or even workable action plans that might result in Pyongyang’s complete and verifiable abandonment of its nuclear weapons. In other words, the United States and the regional powers have merely managed the nuclear crisis in the absence of any ultimate solution. The question of how parties to the talks, namely China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States, can have success without a resolution appears to be more applicable and realistic under the current circumstances. Mr. Flake reemphasized that the Obama administration’s key objective in dealing with North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is largely two-fold—containing problems arising from the crisis and preventing the North from becoming a source of conflict between the United States and its allies in the region.

Mr. Flake lastly pointed out that huge political investment does not necessarily lead to successful and targeted policy outcomes. This argument is manifested in the experience of Christopher Hill in negotiating with North Korea under the leadership of Kim Jong-il. Despite two years of his persistent efforts and enormous political investment put into the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Hill was unable to reverse Pyongyang’s nuclear behavior mainly due to his reluctance to actively engage with allies during the course of negotiations with the North. With the lessons learned from Hill’s experience serving as somewhat of inoculation for anyone who might have been inclined to be overly proac-

“The United States now focuses on a long-term approach to constrain Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities through collaborative efforts within the international nonproliferation regime.”

tive in approaching Pyongyang, policymakers under the Obama administration have adopted a path which diverges from the strategy of the Bush administration. As outlined above, a Northeast Asia Policy is a better description of Obama’s policy toward North Korea. The U.S. strategic interests of maintaining the stability in Northeast Asia prevail over Pyongyang’s nuclear issue itself in the region.

Discussion

Success without Resolutions

Several South Korean discussants pointed out that it can be argued that the United States has been developing a policy of containment in managing the nuclear crisis as an alternative to pushing for a breakthrough for immediate political and security gains in the region. With the underlying assumption that North Korea is increasingly unlikely to abandon its nuclear weapons through dialogue alone in the short term, the United States now focuses on a long-term approach to constrain Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities through collaborative efforts within the international nonproliferation regime. Some policymakers in the United States might push for an immediate breakthrough in nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula as this could serve their political interests as well as represent a tangible achievement for the upcoming 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the NPT. However, the Obama administration has warned against the possibility that Pyongyang might use the NPT Review Conference as a window of opportunity to win short-term economic and political gains using the mounting time pressure on the policymakers in the region. The Obama administration’s careful emphasis on a long-term ap-

proach requires closer collaboration with regional powers, particularly China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, to collectively deal with North Korea’s nuclear behavior, particularly in times of escalating crisis.

However, one of the South Korean discussants gave a skeptical assessment of U.S. policy toward North Korea, which seemingly focuses on managing the crisis rather than resolving the issues. The level of Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile capabilities will be a key determinant of whether or not the U.S. management of the nuclear crisis can actually yield considerable results. Although it is easier to reach a consensus on imposing sanctions against North Korea after its nuclear provocations, China and Russia are somewhat reluctant to fully support sanctions against Pyongyang’s missile tests. Accordingly, North Korea’s military capabilities, particularly in missile technology, are likely to continue to increase given the relatively limited pressure on Pyongyang arising from sanctions targeted to constrain Pyongyang’s missile capabilities. If this is the case, the Obama administration’s strategy of containing Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile capabilities will be difficult to sustain given the subtle reluctance of the Chinese and Russian governments to expand sanctions against the North.

Resumption of the Six-Party Talks

Some participants noted that increasing domestic instability is more likely to compel the North to bolster its attempt to hold onto nuclear weapons to ensure regime survival. Given the symbolic functions of nuclear weapons that serve to undergird Kim Jong-il’s strict control over all sectors of society, particularly the military, the strengthening of its nuclear weapons program is closely linked to regime

“Pyongyang’s continuing demand for a peace treaty outside the framework of multilateral negotiations will hardly make any meaningful progress in inter-Korean relations as well as international efforts to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.”

survival as well as legitimacy of his leadership. This can consequently lead to the North’s explicit or implicit reluctance to return to the Six-Party Talks that were primarily established for verifiable and irreversible disarmament of North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Considering the mounting domestic uncertainty in North Korea in recent months, it will be difficult for the Kim Jong-il regime to unilaterally abandon its nuclear arsenal as well as to return to the talks without preconditions in the immediate future. Accordingly, the increasing domestic instability in North Korea is likely to reduce its strategic incentives to return to multilateral negotiations making the resumption of the Six-Party Talk even more unlikely.

By contrast, an opposite view was carefully voiced among the other discussants from South Korea concerning the link between domestic instability and Pyongyang’s willingness to return to the talks. These discussants mentioned that the increasing uncertainty in domestic politics tend to trigger North Korea to make concessions in order to alleviate deteriorating domestic conditions. The abandonment of nuclear weapons in exchange for economic and diplomatic rewards can be an attractive option, albeit in the short term, when faced with imminent signs of regime collapse in the North. The concept of a curved relationship is more applicable in this case to explain the interplay of Kim Jong-il’s hold on power and the possibility of North Korea’s return to the Six-Party Talks. The effects of the deteriorating domestic problems of North Korea that is on the brink of collapse are more likely to cause a reversal of its nuclear behavior in order to secure regime survival.

In this respect, Mr. Flake pointed out that it is somewhat unrealistic for the Kim Jong-il regime to resort to the Six-Party Talks as a primary means to resolve the ongoing nuclear

crisis on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has explicitly maintained a skeptical stance toward the talks having demanded a formal peace treaty with the United States for the past two years. Given the lack of a new pressure point that would trigger fundamental change in North Korea’s nuclear behavior, particularly from China, the existing equilibrium is likely to be maintained in the near future. Pyongyang’s continuing demand for a peace treaty outside the framework of multilateral negotiations will hardly make any meaningful progress in inter-Korean relations as well as international efforts to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. In this regard, Mr. Flake cautiously added that North Korea’s bilateral demand for a peace treaty would be unacceptable for the United States considering the Obama administration’s strategic focus on the multilateral framework of the Six-Party Talks as a key mechanism

Comprehensive Approach toward North Korea

Much attention was devoted to discussing strategic differences between the Lee administration and the Obama administration toward the North Korean regime. One of the discussants pointed out that the Obama administration pursues a gradual and comprehensive approach in dealing with Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons. This approach does not require strategic decisions from Pyongyang to fundamentally reverse its nuclear behavior as a precondition to resume the Six-Party Talks. Rather, it aims to resolve the nuclear crisis in several phases in the course of the multilateral negotiations, which ultimately leads to the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the North as a result. As the United States is seeking to obtain Pyongyang’s strategic deci-

“Both the Obama administration’s comprehensive approach toward North Korea and the Lee administration’s idea of a “grand bargain” share a common goal of creating conditions that would compel Pyongyang to halt its development of nuclear weapons and return to the Six-Party Talk.”

sion to give up its nuclear weapons as talks proceed, they are likely to reach a consensus in the initial phase of talks, whereas it is somewhat difficult to obtain a reliable and meaningful response from the North as the unilateral abandonment of its nuclear weapons is considered unacceptable to Pyongyang’s strategic interests.

On the other hand, some discussants continued to differentiate the U.S. comprehensive approach from the Lee administration’s idea of a “grand bargain”. One of the most noticeable differences is that the Lee government is pushing the North to make serious steps to stop its illicit transfer of nuclear technology and eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons as a precondition for resuming any kind of negotiations. This South Korean approach, however, can possibly lower the chances of persuading North Korea to make a strategic decision to unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons in the first place without any visible security and economic gains. The complete abandonment of nuclear weapons is simply unacceptable to North Korea in the initial phase of negotiations without the guarantee of regime survival and subsequent economic and diplomatic awards. Although the grand bargain policy has a relatively low possibility of reaching an agreement between North Korea and participants of the Six-Party Talks in the initial phase of resolving the nuclear crisis, it is more likely to yield considerable outcomes once North Korea makes an irreversible strategic decision to change its nuclear behavior.

Given the slightly diverging assumptions of Seoul and Washington in dealing with the Kim Jong-il regime, Mr. Flake noted that these two approaches toward North Korea are not fundamentally different. Although the Obama administration does not have a clear defini-

tion of the Lee government’s idea of a “grand bargain,” both approaches share a common goal of creating conditions that would compel North Korea to make the strategic decision to halt its development of nuclear weapons and return to the Six-Party Talks. Mr. Flake reiterated that what is more important is the strategic coordination among the participants of the talks based on their shared interests in promoting the denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. ■

Discussants

Seongwhun Cheon (Korea Institute for National Unification)

Kang Choi (Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security)

Chaesung Chun (Seoul National University)

Jihwan Hwang (Myongji University)