

Prospect for Resumption of Six-Party Talks and  
South Korea's North Korea Policy  
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Interviewee

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After Wu Dawei (武大偉), China's special representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs, visited North Korea from August 26 to 30, China officially proposed to hold a Track 1.5 meeting on September 18. It invited diplomats and scholars from the Six-Party Talks' member states to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Talks and the eighth anniversary of the September 2005 Joint Statement. However, during his visits to South Korea, China, and Japan from September 10 to 12, Glyn Davies, U.S. special representative of the Secretary of State for North Korea policy, reaffirmed that the concrete action by North Korea toward denuclearization is a precondition for resuming the Six-Party Talks. On September 18, 2013, the Commemorative Seminar "Retrospect & Outlook: A Decade of the Six-Party Talks" was attended by researchers and officials involved in the Six-Party Talks.

On September 11, 2013, EAI invited Sang Hyun Lee, director of the Security Studies Program at the Sejong Institute, to analyze the differences between U.S. and Chinese perceptions on the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, prospects for change on the Korean Peninsula, and North Korea policy recommendations for South Korea.

**Q1: What are the respective positions of the U.S. and China on the resumption of the Six-Party Talks?**

**A1: "There must be serious, meaningful efforts from North Korea to work toward denuclearization for the U.S. to resume the Six-Party Talks. However, China believes that North Korea's willingness to denuclearize should be discussed through dialogue."**

- On the issue of North Korea's nuclear program, the U.S. maintains President Obama's policy of "strategic patience." The U.S. government calls for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of all of the North Korean government's nuclear weapons programs. In order to achieve such a goal, the U.S. is likely to continue a two-track policy combining "openness to dialogue when possible" with "sustained, robust pressure through sanctions when necessary."
- At the hearing on U.S. policy toward North Korea held by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 7, Davies testified that North Korea continues to rebuff offers from the U.S. for an improved relationship with the U.S. and integration into the international community, provided that North Korea demonstrates a willingness to fulfill its denuclearization commitments. Davies reaffirmed the U.S. commitments to "authentic and credible negotiations" to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement. However, he also outlined four key princi-

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ples in dealing with North Korea: First, the U.S. will not accept North Korea as a nuclear state; second, the U.S. will not reward North Korea just for the absence of roguish behavior or for returning to dialogue; third, the U.S. will not tolerate North Korea's provocative behavior toward its neighbors; and fourth, U.S.-North Korea relations cannot be ameliorated without sustained improvement in inter-Korean relations and human rights violations. Additionally, during his speech at Asia Society New York on March 11, then-National Security Advisor Tom Donilon summarized the four principles of U.S. policy toward North Korea as follows: First, maintaining close and expanded cooperation with Japan and South Korea; second, continuing U.S. refusal to reward North Korea for bad behavior; third, committing to the defense of the U.S. homeland and its allies; and fourth, encouraging North Korea to choose a better path.

- Davies, who visited South Korea in September, made it clear that North Korea needs to take the Six-Party Talks as a serious attempt to bring about North Korean denuclearization and that the U.S. will engage in talks only if North Korea demonstrates its willingness to work toward verifiable denuclearization. He also reiterated that North Korea has not shown a strong determination to implement United Nations Security Council resolutions and pointed out that North Korea's claim of "legitimate status" as a nuclear-weapons state is a main hindrance to the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. The U.S. will not resume the Six-Party Talks for the sake of talks, but, rather, there must be serious, meaningful efforts from North Korea to denuclearize in order for more talks to proceed.
- China, on the other hand, supports the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, since it can strengthen its diplomatic power by holding the talks. Regarding the insistence by the U.S. on North Korea's authentic willingness to work toward denuclearization, China takes a stance that such willingness should be discussed through dialogue.
- There are two important implications for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. First, at the U.S.-China summit in June 2013, both the U.S. and China reached three concrete accords: North Korea's nuclear program is a significant diplomatic issue for U.S.-China relations, neither the U.S. nor China will accept North Korea as a nuclear-armed state, and the endgame for U.S. and Chinese policy toward North Korea is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Presidents Obama and Xi also agreed that the North's continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons program is not compatible with its economic development goals. Therefore, both the U.S. and China's ultimate goals for North Korea policy are aligned, but the two countries differ in what should be done to resume the Six-Party Talks.
- China's perception of North Korea has recently changed. China's leadership has been debating whether North Korea is a strategic asset or a burden. The perception of North Korea as a strategic asset is based on the Chinese traditional perspective on North Korea, "唇亡齒寒," which literally means "wait for the other shoe to drop." According to this view, North Korea acts as a buffer zone protecting China's security. However, North Korea's reckless provocations and continued nuclear tests have also brought the U.S. to actualize its "Rebalancing to Asia" strategy, thereby hindering China's core interests. This explains why North Korea is increasingly seen by China as a strategic burden, rather than an asset. After the third nuclear test, a sharp increase in negative public views toward North Korea and failure on the part of the Chinese government to manage such negative public opinions were indicative of China's frustration with North Korea. Even though there may not be any major changes in China's policy toward North Korea in the short run, it is important to note that there has been a growing diversity of public opinions regarding China's North Korea policy, and that the Xi Jinping administration has been giving implicit warning signs to North Korea.

**Q2: How likely is it that the Six-Party Talks would be resumed? What future implication would the resumption of the talks have for the Korean Peninsula?**

**A2: "The Six-Party Talks will not resume in the near future. How the U.S. rebalancing strategy and China's "New Type of Great Power Relationship" will unfold remains to be seen. It also will be difficult for the U.S., China, and Japan to seek a more active approach to the North Korean nuclear problem."**

- Whether the U.S. and China will be able to cooperate on the North Korea issue depends on how U.S.-China relations unfold in the future. North Korea-U.S. relations can be seen as a sub-variable within U.S.-China relations. If U.S.-China relations are friendly, a chance for better cooperation on North Korea between the two countries is high. On the other hand, if a serious conflict arises between the U.S. and China, differences in the two countries' policies toward North Korea may become even more difficult to resolve. Currently, there are several areas of discord, such as internet censorship, human rights issues, especially with regard to the Dalai Lama, and currency problems with the renminbi. Overall, however, U.S.-China relations are cooperative. Both nations are unlikely to be willing to risk such a positive and cooperative relationship over any specific issue, and the North Korea problem, therefore, will be managed by the two countries with an eye toward maintaining the status quo.
- The most important player in the resumption of the Six-Party Talks is the U.S. North Korea argues that it developed its nuclear program in response to hostile U.S. policy toward the North, and the U.S. should take the initiative in resolving nuclear problems on the Korean Peninsula. As such, dialogue between North Korea and the U.S. is the most important factor in resolving the nuclear issue. China is the second most important player. China hosts the Six-Party Talks; therefore, how China wields its diplomatic power factors significantly into resolving the North Korea problem. Among the other participants, Japan places priority on the North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens over the North Korea nuclear problem, and Russia is not pushing forward any active voice. It will be difficult to expect any active effort from Japan or Russia toward the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Therefore, the only remaining important player in the resumption of the talks, besides the U.S. and China, is South Korea.
- Three prospects can be suggested for how circumstances surrounding the Korean Peninsula will develop in the latter part of 2013. First, the Six-Party Talks will not resume in the near future. With the U.S. government's strong position regarding the first necessary steps required for North Korea to take in order to demonstrate its efforts are authentic, it remains to be seen whether North Korea will accept such preconditions set forth by the U.S. anytime soon.
- Second, U.S.-China relations can now be explained with the U.S. "Rebalancing to Asia" strategy and China's "New Type of Great Power Relationship." The fact that the U.S. places heavier emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region and that China urges the U.S. to take into consideration both U.S. and Chinese national interests are important indicators of whether circumstances on the Korean Peninsula will be positive for the second half of 2013.
- Third, it will be difficult for the U.S., China, and Japan to seek a more active approach to the North Korean nuclear problem. The U.S. is feeling fatigue over its adherence to its policy of strategic patience. Even if the U.S. plans to shift its focus and resources to the Asia-Pacific region, it is unlikely that the U.S. will be able to play a proactive role in the North Korea problem, mainly due to restrictions by federal budget sequester cuts and mounting conflicts in the Middle East in Egypt and Syria. China cannot afford to take the initiative, either. The Chinese government is under pressure to maintain its rapid economic growth rate, as well as resolve domestic issues such as wealth distribution and political reforms. Diplomatically, China is also mired in the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute with Japan, and, therefore,

is not free to shift its focus to resolving the North Korea issue. The situation is similar in Japan. Japan's recent right-wing moves, which were a response by political leaders and the Japanese public to recover from the Great East Japan Earthquake, have undermined Japan's regional leadership and credibility. Furthermore, the past North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens, and not North Korea's nuclear program issue, has become central to Japan's North Korea policy. Due to the aforementioned situations, the U.S., China, and Japan hope that the Park Geun-hye administration will take a leadership role in resolving the North Korea issue. This opens up a chance for South Korea to implement and execute its North Korea policy more assertively.

### **Q3: What are the North Korea policy recommendations for the South Korean government?**

**A3: "The South Korean government needs to take a more comprehensive approach to the North Korea issue. There also needs to be a concrete action plan for the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative and *trustpolitik*. The international community must continuously reaffirm that North Korea's survival can be guaranteed only if North Korea changes its track and responds positively to the policy suggestions by its neighboring countries."**

- There have been debates about how to strike a balance between South Korea-North Korea cooperation and international cooperation. Concerns have been raised that South Korea-U.S. cooperation and their alliance might be undermined by any potential positive change in South-North Korea relations, especially in the midst of discord between South Korea and the U.S. on North Korea policy. It is important to note two facts regarding these concerns.
- First, President Obama's new foreign policy team in his second administration is not prepared to take the initiative in resolving the North Korea nuclear problem. Secretary of State John Kerry and his deputies have just settled down, and Daniel Russel, assistant secretary for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the Department of State, was only recently appointed. It is expected that U.S. policy toward North Korea is currently under review at the State Department. After the review is completed, there might be a change in the U.S. strategic patience strategy, but it is not likely that the U.S. will take an active role on the North Korea issue.
- Second, it should be remembered that the most important and directly-affected player in the North Korea nuclear problem is South Korea. If South Korea takes the initiative and works toward improving inter-Korean relations, it can lead to international cooperation with North Korea. Since it is unlikely that the U.S., China, and Japan will shift their focus and take an active role in the North Korea nuclear problem, it is up to South Korea to take such a lead.
- In terms of international cooperation, there is nearly no point of conflict with regard to reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex. However, if talks on reopening the Mount Kumgang tour start, then United Nations Security Council Resolution 2094, which was adopted after North Korea's third nuclear test and restricts bulk cash transfers to North Korea, might create a problem. This explains why it is necessary to convince North Korea that how it behaves toward the international community will significantly affect progress in the improvement of the South-North Korean relationship. A clear message must be conveyed to North Korea that if it conducts yet another nuclear test after reopening the Mount Kumgang tour, South Korea will be limited in its ability to use international cooperation to improve South-North Korea relations.
- The South Korean government must assertively work toward normalizing the Kaesong Industrial Complex, reopening the Mount Kumgang tour, and resuming reunions of war-torn families. For the resumption of the Six-Party Talks,

South Korea needs to contribute significantly to preparing the groundwork for North Korea-U.S. and North Korea-Japan dialogue and getting more constructive involvement from China. The more North Korea is integrated into the international community, the more North Korea will face restrictions on its roguish behavior, thereby laying a foundation upon which the South-North Korean relationship can fundamentally improve. Therefore, it is crucial that constructive efforts to improve inter-Korean relations should be conducted simultaneously with plans to prepare a common ground for international cooperation on resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.

- Taking the aforementioned factors into consideration, three policy recommendations for South Korea can be provided. First, the South Korean government must understand the complexity of the North Korea issue, while taking a comprehensive approach. North Korea's nuclear program is closely linked to not only the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also the North Korean regime itself. Resolving the North Korea nuclear problem will not automatically solve the various problems tied to North Korea, such as human rights issues or regime collapse. Therefore, simultaneously implementing the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative and *trustpolitik* - proposed by President Park Geun-hye under the belief that peace and security on the Korean Peninsula are inseparable from those in Northeast Asia - is appropriate. Peace and security issues in the Northeast Asian region as a whole should also be taken into consideration when approaching the North Korea problem.
- Second, the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative and *trustpolitik* need a concrete action plan. How such an action plan would proceed and bring about systemic and verifiable reform in North Korea must be scrutinized and discussed in depth. How successfully the Park administration implements the action plans for both the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative and *trustpolitik* would be important criteria in evaluating the administration during its tenure.
- Third, it is crucial to convey a consistent message that real reform in North Korea is a way to guarantee its own survival. Regardless of how many credible and sound policy recommendations that neighboring countries suggest to North Korea, it is up to North Korea to make a decision. Unless North Korea decides to accept suggestions by the international community and bring itself to commit to reforms, there will not be any progress. The international community must continuously reaffirm that North Korea's survival can be guaranteed only if North Korea changes its track and responds positively and open-mindedly to the suggestions made by neighboring countries.

## About the Interviewee

### Sang Hyun Lee

Sang Hyun Lee is director of the Security Studies Program at the Sejong Institute and previously served as director-general for Policy Planning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dr. Lee received his B.S. from Seoul National University and Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.