

## **What Do They Want?** By Victor Cha

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The latest statements out of North Korea appear to be telegraphing Pyongyang's next set of provocative moves. They have threatened further ballistic missile tests, another nuclear test, and steps to acquire their own civilian nuclear capabilities unless the United Nations "apologizes" for its punitive statement against the April missile launch.

In the past, DPRK threatening actions were always explained as a tactic to get the attention of the U.S. and draw Washington into bilateral talks. But the new U.S. administration has already signaled its willingness to have high-level negotiations with Pyongyang through Special Envoy Stephen Bosworth. Yet the North continues to threaten and refuses to come to the table. So what do they really want?

I think the North wants three things. First, as a former State Department official who worked on the Clinton-era negotiations stated at a meeting in Washington earlier this month, the North wants agreements with the U.S. that are "election-proof." In other words, they want agreements that will outlast a change of presidencies. They have been burned once before: in 2000, Pyongyang's leadership saw themselves at the threshold of a new relationship with the U.S. that dissipated quite rapidly when the Bush administration came to power. Arguably (and ironically), the Bush administration ended its eight years in office trying to make agreements that were permanent, including the removal of the DPRK from the state sponsor of terrorism list. It is more complex to put a country back on the list than to take it off.

Second, the North wants negotiations not about denuclearization, but about arms control. Their model is to turn the Six-Party Talks into a bilateral U.S.-DPRK nuclear arms reduction negotiation in which the North is accorded a status as a nuclear weapon state that agrees to mutual nuclear arms reductions (not elimination) and confidence building measures. They frequently refer to the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms control negotiations as their empirical referent. The outcome of this negotiation, in the North's view, is a situation like India: an agreement in which the North is assured of a civilian nuclear energy element and the carving off of a portion of its nuclear programs outside international inspection, which can then serve as a nuclear deterrent. In short, they want the rules of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty regime rewritten for them as they were done for India.

Third, the North wants a particular type of security assurance from the United States. This stems from the fundamental reform dilemma that the regime faces: it needs to open up to survive, but the process of opening leads to the regime's demise. Thus, what Pyongyang wants is an assurance from the United States that it will not allow the regime to collapse during a reform process. This is different from a negative security assurance. The negative security assurance was given to North Korea in the 2005 Joint Statement when the U.S. agreed "not to attack North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons." This statement – astounding on its own merits – led the Russian delegation to pull aside the North Koreans to tell them they believed the U.S. was serious, based on their own Cold War experience when they could not get such an assurance from Washington. But this is not what the North wants. They want an assurance that the United States will support and bolster the regime in Pyongyang as they go through the dangerous and potentially destabilizing effects of a reform process.

The first of these North Korean "wants" is certainly plausible for the Obama administration to do. The second and third, however, are obviously more problematic. The former would create a crisis of confidence in the alliance with Japan as well as with the ROK. The latter would be anathema to U.S. values and human rights principles.

The new U.S. special envoy has his work cut out for him as he consults in the region on these and other questions. However, his presence in the region as the North stewards its own domestic leadership transition is commendable. The period afforded by Pyongyang's boycotting of the talks is a good opportunity to demonstrate continued U.S. political commitment to the negotiations and to demonstrate squarely that a failure of the process rests at the feet of Pyongyang and not at those of Washington.

If you can't get 6 to 0 in the Six-Party Talks. It is always worthwhile to get 5 to 1.