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A Deal with North Korea? Where do we go from here? by Victor Cha

The Assessment and Lessons

With the conclusion of the U.S.-DPRK talks in Berlin in mid-September, the United States averted another potential crisis with the irascible North Koreans. This pattern of negotiation and brinkmanship, dating back to the 1992-94 events that led to the Agreed Framework, has become familiar albeit no less comforting as the outcome in each iteration always remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, we have learned some new things about dealing with this reclusive regime as a result of the agreement reached at Berlin. The first is that DPRK threats are not based on bluffs. While many saw Pyongyang's softening of rhetoric and expressed openness to negotiating a solution to the missile standoff a few weeks ago in a positive light, the clear subtext was that the North Koreans were ready to play their card – that is, they were only willing to negotiate after they were ready to demonstrate their long-range missile capability. Thus, calling North Korea's "bluff" (as some have advocated) would have been a disaster.

Second, policy coordination among the allies worked. What was very different about this round of interaction with the North compared with the past was Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo's deliberate, coordinated and transparent messages to the North of the punitive consequences of a missile launch. This effectively confounded any DPRK hopes of leverage by driving a wedge between the allies. The U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination and oversight group (TCOG), created by the Perry policy review, was the primary instrument of policy coordination and will be among the most important accomplishments of this congressionally-mandated review.

Third, the sanctions-for-missiles exchange at Berlin may show that the DPRK is indeed responsive to engagement when they are offered something concrete. One school of thought on North Korea (e.g., Sigal, Harrison) argues that the North's intransigent behavior pursuant to the 1994 Agreed Framework was largely motivated by U.S. reneging on its end of the bargain (i.e., delayed HFO deliveries, no lifting of sanctions). Thus, when the U.S. at Berlin took steps to reinstate commitments made in 1994, the North Koreans were willing to offer concessions on the missile launch. I tend to be more skeptical than this interpretation, but one cannot deny that the turn of events at Berlin does appear to validate this claim.

Is the Clinton Administration guilty of "rewarding" DPRK rogue behavior as charged by Congress? This is difficult to calculate because negotiation with North Korea has reached the level of the metaphysical. We gained a "non-event" in terms of an informal moratorium on DPRK missile launching and a non-crisis. And because the material benefits of a lifting of U.S. sanctions on the North are likely to be minimal (would YOU invest in North Korea?), the North essentially gains the "symbolism" of the United States taking the first proactive step toward a more normal relationship with Pyongyang. Nevertheless, for those who like to keep score, the U.S. technically did not "give up" anything new with this interim agreement as the lifting of sanctions was a task already specified in the Agreed Framework. The North on the other hand allowed itself at least temporarily to offer concessions on the new issue of missiles, something mentioned, but not explicitly linked to the 1994 agreement. One could argue that the North's true motivation is the potential for cash emerging out of Japan-DPRK talks that will be opened by this agreement, but that is far from certain and subject to a more formal DPRK moratorium on missile testing and exports.

Where do we go from here?

How can we be certain the North Koreans will hold to their agreement? What is to stop them from extorting more concessions by manufacturing another crisis later? The short answer is nothing. The U.S. can rescind the lifting of sanctions if the North again plays the missile card. In this sense, by offering them a carrot at Berlin, much to the consternation of Congress and hawks, we also have gained a future stick.

However, if the North does not value this carrot, then there is very little deterring them from doing this again. This is why current engagement strategies practiced by the U.S. and ROK regarding North Korea have to be "enhanced" by additional measures that will both hedge against and act as a future deterrent to DPRK backtracking from Berlin. The central element of such an enhancement strategy is ROK participation in Theater Missile Defense.

The South Korean government has expressed decided disinterest in participating in a U.S.-led TMD initiative in the region. Strategically, Seoul argues that TMD is unnecessary given that the primary DPRK threat is artillery, not ballistic missiles. The cost and technology requirements for participation are beyond the South's current means. In addition, ROK officials informally state that China's strongly expressed antipathy to TMD is another major reason for Seoul's policy. Beijing has publicly applauded the ROK decision not to participate, and even made clear the implicit quid pro quo at assistant minister talks on Northeast Asia disarmament and nonproliferation issues in Seoul in early June when China's Director General for Disarmament Sha Zukang reiterated support for Seoul's decision to refrain from joining the TMD program and made concurrent statements about the need for the DPRK to sign on to the CWC and BWC. In short, Seoul argues that TMD is too expensive, upsetting to others, and irrelevant to ROK security needs.

This is not a well-thought out position. What it does not take account of is that supporting TMD can actually strengthen the credibility and potential for success of engagement strategies vis-a-vis the DPRK. As Berlin has shown, engagement is most effective with the DPRK when it is: 1) undergirded by robust defense capabilities; and 2) communicates clearly that engagement is a choice of the strong and not an expedient of the weak. Supporting TMD is one way of effecting an "enhanced" engagement strategy. Cost and technology requirements may limit the extent of ROK participation to lower- tier defense systems, in particular PAC-3 batteries and ground-based early warning radar. But even this would serve a number of U.S.-ROK interests. First, as noted, it would strengthen the credibility of engagement; second, it would be least upsetting to China as lower-tier PAC-3 defense, unlike Navy area systems with missile blocks on Aegis cruisers, are stationary and do not therefore threaten to be employed elsewhere (i.e., Taiwan straits). Third, while such a system would not cover all of Korea (for fuller coverage, it would have to be complemented by U.S. upper tier systems in airborne laser, ground-based THAAD and Navy Theater Wide), it would cover high-value targets.

Moreover, the belief that the ROK's primary threat is only DPRK artillery (not coverable by TMD) is incorrect. War gaming scenarios show that a likely strategy of a second DPRK invasion would be to deny, with chemical attacks, access to logistical nodes and ports in the South and possibly in Japan, thereby delaying American reinforcements and supplies long enough for DPRK forces to overtake Seoul and replenish forces. This means that TMD defense against DPRK missiles is as much an ROK concern as one of the U.S. and Japan. ROK beliefs that it could rely on the U.S. for such a contingency are badly misguided. Experts say a minimally effective defense would require 22 PAC-3 batteries, which is far less than what the U.S. supports today. Moreover, even if the U.S. had enough launchers, it could not be assured of getting them to Korea if logistical nodes were already contaminated. The ROK rationales for nonparticipation in TMD therefore do not appear to take into account both the strategic realities and the potential for "enhanced" engagement with the DPRK. South Korean participation in studies on potential TMD architectures for the peninsula would only strengthen, not undercut or contradict, engagement.

Victor Cha is a Professor in the Department of Government, School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. This article appeared in the Nautilus Institute's NAPSNET on September 17, and is reprinted with permission. For various responses to this article, see [www.nautilus.org/fora/index.html].