



Triangulation and Trustpolitik

by James J. Przystup

James J. Przystup (Przystupj@ndu.edu) is a Senior Fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the United States National Defense University. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Defense Department or any other agency of the Federal Government.

The North-South meeting at Panmunjom on June 9 offered the remote hope that Pyongyang, after a third nuclear test, a new round of UN sanctions, and the spring season of hyperventilating belligerent rhetoric, could be coming to understand that it is, in fact, in an unprecedentedly very bad place -- even for North Korea.

However, Sunday's hopes crashed by mid-week, as Pyongyang backtracked over levels of official engagement. And Sunday's call for anywhere, anytime, "senior-level" talks "without preconditions" with the United States only speaks to the unyielding strength of "old thinking" in Pyongyang, seeking to engage Washington and denigrate Seoul.

This is unfortunate because North Korea is now in the bull's eye of a slowly constricting US-ROK-China triangle of strategic cooperation. Pyongyang's policy options are narrowing daily, even as its economic prospects continue to deteriorate and relations with its sole, erstwhile ally have come under increasing strain.

In May, the Bank of China closed accounts with North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank. This significant step took place after several Chinese banks at the China-North Korea border had taken similar steps in their dealings with North Korean entities. And, at the end of May, China's President Xi Jinping made clear to visiting DPRK Vice Marshall Choe Ryong-hae that China supports the denuclearization of North Korea and its early return to the Six-Party Talks. The Xi-Choe meeting followed months of public discussion among China's foreign policy and national security elites over the long-term value of the North Korea connection. It would be difficult to imagine news of the debate, in some fashion, not finding its way back in reporting cables from the DPRK embassy in Beijing.

On May 7, President Park Geun-hye met in Washington with President Obama. In the aftermath of the DPRK's warnings of approaching nuclear war, the summit reaffirmed the US commitment to the security of the Republic of Korea and underscored the enduring commitments of the United States and the Republic of Korea to the denuclearization of North Korea and its return to the Six-Party Talks. The two presidents also reaffirmed that recent threats and provocations would no longer be successful in eliciting concessions -- the time has come for Pyongyang to understand that the old ways of doing business are over. President Obama also announced

full US support for President Park's "trust building" policy toward the North.

A month later, on June 7-8, Presidents Xi and Obama met at the Sunnylands Summit. In a bilateral relationship beset with numerous economic, political and security challenges, the two leaders, looking for areas to demonstrate that the United States and China can work together, found common purpose in their commitment to the denuclearization of North Korea. The DPRK's growing nuclear arsenal threatens to unravel the security equation that has supported peace, stability, and prosperity in Northeast Asia and significantly contributed to China's own rise. In response to the DPRK's third nuclear test, voices in South Korea are calling for the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons as well as for the development of an indigenous nuclear weapons program. In Japan, concerns about developments on the Peninsula are intensifying. And the threat of nuclear proliferation from a failing North Korea is a long-standing, shared security concern.

Soon President Park will visit China. President Park and President Xi will be looking for common ground beyond growing trade and investment ties. It is safe to say that North Korea will be *a*, if not *the*, major agenda item. Neither Seoul nor Beijing is interested in the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang -- at least not in the short- to mid-term, until both governments have a much clearer understanding what a unified Peninsula would look like. Both Seoul and Beijing are interested in advancing economic opening and reform in the North. In this context, Chinese support for President Park's trust-building policy is almost a "slam dunk." For Beijing, enhanced cooperation with Seoul over North Korea offers the prospect of increasing Chinese influence in any unification scenario and, over the long-term, decreasing US influence.

President Park's realistic "Trustpolitik" is an opportunity for Pyongyang to exit from its own self-imposed no-exit, dead-end policies. Trust politics, as Dr. Seongwhun Cheon, director of the Center for North Korean Studies at the Korea Institute for National Unification has written, starts with humanitarian assistance, followed by inter-Korean economic, social and cultural exchanges and cooperation, leading to a third stage in which mutual trust allows for denuclearization. Trustpolitik is a first step in the long road to denuclearization, which ultimately must accommodate the security concerns of all parties.

The United States recognizes that denuclearization will not happen overnight. During the Obama-Park summit, a senior administration official underscored US support for trust politics and acknowledged that the end point, denuclearization, will require "incremental engagement." In this context, the official made clear that the United States is prepared to respond if North Korea makes the right decisions.

Keeping trust politics and North-South engagement aligned with the ultimate goal of denuclearization will require close coordination between Seoul and Washington, as well as Beijing's willingness to provide Pyongyang with the proper incentives – and disincentives. There is, of course, the real possibility that Pyongyang will attempt to focus engagement on North-South issues in an effort to develop and exploit policy gaps on denuclearization. But recent summitry indicates that the United States, the ROK, and China are in the process of aligning policies toward North Korea and narrowing opportunities for Pyongyang's traditional wedge-driving tactics.

Looking back over the decades from the breakdown of the past week, the list of slights and grievances, promises made and promises broken -- all excuses for not moving forward -- is lengthy. But, as recent months have demonstrated for Pyongyang, verbal threats and provocations have lost their shock-reward value and kinetic provocations will be met with negative consequences. Moving from confrontation to cooperation promises better rewards for all.

The skeptic in me says that we've seen this all before and, at some point, some North Korean "Lucy" will again pull back the football and trust politics, like Charlie Brown, will land flat on its face. But, is it possible that someone, somewhere in North Korea, will recognize that you don't have to be weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing – and act accordingly? But, after the past two Sundays, one does have to ask if there are any weathermen in Pyongyang.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.