PacNet
Number 21

Pacific Forum CSIS
Honolulu, Hawaii

March 18, 2014

The Cold War on the Korean Peninsula: Finding the Off Button by Ron Huisken

Dr. Ron Huisken (ron.huisken@anu.edu.au) is a Senior Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Centre at Australian National University.

The confrontation on the Korean Peninsula has an almost fossil-like quality. North Korea, in particular, has driven the peninsula into a calcified rut so deep that all perspective has been lost. Initiatives to shift the stalemate have tended to become smaller and narrower, and easily overwhelmed by the deeply embedded instincts to preserve the status quo.

It has been, and continues to be, a very costly stalemate. Moreover, the risks that attend this stalemate – inadvertent war, further nuclear proliferation, exacerbating US-China strategic competition – are growing.

China reportedly told the US point-blank in 1993-94 and again in 2002, that North Korea's apparent nuclear weapons program was America's problem. China then consented to host talks among the US, ROK, Japan, Russia, and the DPRK to persuade the latter to abandon its nuclear quest. Bejing worked energetically to keep this forum open but preferred to be the host rather than a direct participant. It also essentially declined to bring any real pressure to bear on the DPRK to give serious consideration to the comprehensive proposal that took shape in these negotiations, even as Pyongyang declared its status with a nuclear test in 2006.

2010 was a watershed. Beijing's resolute defense of Pyongyang's extreme actions – the sinking of an ROK frigate in a surprise attack and the deadly artillery shelling of an ROK island – had a deep impact in Washington. It can be inferred that this episode was an important stimulus, alongside developments in China-Japan relations and in the South China Sea, for what became the re-balancing strategy that Obama unveiled in 2011.

More recently, the DPRK's new young leader, Kim Jung-Un, conducted a third nuclear test in February 2013 while directing a blizzard of threatening rhetoric at the US and ROK in particular and sustaining it for several months. China's new leadership formally took office in the midst of this prolonged outburst and began to signal that it had recalibrated its policy positions on the DPRK. Xi Jinping said publicly that no state had the right to frame its security policy with complete disregard for the interests of others; civilian and military emissaries from the DPRK were transparently given a very frosty reception; and at the Sunnylands summit with Obama, both leaders said they not accept the DPRK as a state with nuclear weapons.

Beijing and Pyongyang have tried the straight-forward option of reconvening the Six-Party Talks but the other parties have insisted that resuming negotiations without Pyongyang taking concrete steps to (a) signal its preparedness to put its nuclear weapon program on the negotiating table and (b) acknowledge the agreements and understandings reached in past negotiations, sends all the wrong signals and sows the seeds for renewed failure.

If walking straight back in to negotiations to reverse the DPRK's nuclear weapon program is not an option, are there alternative ways of approaching this issue that make practical, political and strategic sense?

Looking for a new way in

First, the clear objective must remain minimizing the further development of and ultimately terminating the DPRK's nuclear program (and its serial endeavors to proliferate its nuclear and missile capabilities). Pyongyang insists that future negotiations be predicated on the fact that it is a state with nuclear weapons, not on dissuading it from acquiring these weapons. There may be grounds for confidence that proliferation beyond the DPRK can be prevented but the consequences of further proliferation are likely to be so profound that it would be folly to lightly accept a nuclear DPRK as a reality and hope that the fallout from this development can be effectively contained.

Second, China needs to become more exposed as a player with significant influence and major interests, and to overtly take ownership (alongside the US, Japan, and the ROK) of proposals being put to Pyongyang. China's role as the host of six-party sessions has afforded it some distance and detachment from the process, and greater freedom to pursue its interests, so to speak, behind the scenes. The DPRK question has emerged as singularly important to the effort by the US and China to develop robust understandings to underpin a constructive partnership in East Asia. Experience to date makes clear that the DPRK seeks recognition and acceptance as is, including the right to remain as autonomous and detached from the world as its leaders have deemed necessary since the late 1940s and acceptance of the singular tools of authoritarian governance that it has evolved.

Third, the center of gravity of efforts to attenuate the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula should shift as quickly and as completely as possible to the two Koreas. These states have the most gain and to lose, and neither can be regarded as requiring a chaperone or an agent. The prominent characteristic of past negotiations – a wide gathering within which to indulge Pyongyang's craving to deal bilaterally with Washington – is no recipe for focused discussions and clear responsibility for outcomes. Beijing will have the critical voice to convince Pyongyang that its attitudes are obsolete and unacceptable.

Fourth, there is a broad consensus around the view that Pyongyang recognized long ago that maintaining and

modernizing its numerically huge armed forces would be economically unsustainable. Nuclear weapons constituted an alternative that could be sustained over the long term. Within these parameters, Pyongyang has clearly cherished the deterrent value of its capacity to bring significant force to bear on Seoul at very short notice with artillery and rocket systems deployed in hardened sites along the DMZ

A Strategy for Renewed Engagement

Nearly six years have passed since the last round of Six-Party Talks and the gap between the parties on how to get back to the negotiating table remains wide. A great deal of ground has been lost since the highpoint of the six-party process. Simply insisting that all concerned should ignore this history is unlikely to deliver the outcomes desired. An alternative approach is to start with necessary or useful objectives that have no direct connection with the Six-Party Talks agenda but that can test appetites for progress and then build commitment and momentum for substantive re-engagement.

In a nutshell, the policy challenge is to capitalize on and test the boundaries of the new variable in the Northeast Asia equation: while China still values North Korea as a strategic buffer and will not press directly for transformative change, there appears to be stronger determination in Beijing to press its small ally in the direction of greater stability on the peninsula and eventual denuclearization.

Possible New Package

The six states of Northeast Asia could declare their collective aspiration to build a stable region characterized by strong expectations of peaceful change. To this end, they could:

A. Negotiate a collective security assurance drawing on the norms articulated in the UN Charter (and, of course, protecting the inalienable right to self-defense). Although substantively a reiteration of existing obligations, it would not be unreasonable, in light of the state of relations among most six-party members, to regard the value of this step as not confined to North Korea. Pyongyang could be encouraged to host the event.

B. North and South Korea could be encouraged to consider measures that would make their confrontation at the 38th parallel more stable through lessening pressures to escalate in a crisis and provide more scope for management and negotiation. This border is already highly militarized and, many might argue, constitutes a stable and mature stalemate. The introduction of an indigenous nuclear weapon capability should, however be regarded as, transformative: however small the risk of a crisis getting out of hand, the potential consequences have escalated dramatically. It would be logical for these negotiations to be led by North and South Korea, with further participation limited to China and the US.

As an example, consideration might be given to widening the DMZ to the outskirts of Seoul and an equivalent distance to the North, with the expanded DMZ to be monitored by international observers. This could be presented as both an enduring gesture of goodwill and a symbol of resolve to see the entire process through, as well as a substantively important confidence and security building measure that strengthens stability. It usefully "swims with the tide" because US forces have already moved out of this space, or are scheduled to do so in the near future. The proposal can also be construed as balanced in the sense that both the DPRK and the ROK have important capabilities deployed in this space. Verification takes care of itself once the principle of international monitoring is accepted.

Consideration could be given to suspending (rather than revoking) existing UNSC sanctions when (a) the widened DMZ is fully in place and (b) credible assurances have been given of substantive re-engagement on the six-party agenda, including its ultimate objectives.

C. The six-party process should be resumed with North and South Korea as co-hosts or alternate hosts. As the host of the earlier talks and Pyongyang's alliance partner, China will necessarily bear primary responsibility for finding ways to persuade North Korea that this format is appropriate and necessary.

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