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The road to better US-North Korea relations starts in Seoul by James L. Schoff

James L. Schoff (jschoff@ifpa.org) is Director of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and he is co-author of the book Nuclear Matters in North Korea: Building a multilateral response for future stability in Northeast Asia.

Shuttle diplomacy surrounding North Korea and its nuclear programs is back in full swing, with China and North Korea exchanging high-level visits, the UN's political chief visiting Pyongyang, and a possible multilateral gathering in Beijing next month. At issue is the potential for restarting stalled Six-Party Talks aimed at North Korean denuclearization and political normalization in the region. Throughout this process, Pyongyang has tried to weaken the solidarity between the United States and South Korea and set up bilateral talks with Washington, but US officials have resisted. This is the right policy, but it is time for the ROK and the US to adopt a more proactive, but still closely coordinated, approach to relations with the North. The inter-Korean component of this multi-faceted diplomatic endeavor is more important than ever, and it would be useful to link progress in US-North Korea relations more clearly to North-South improvements.

North Korea remains coy about its intentions for resuming six-party negotiations and fulfilling its obligations. Last year, North Korea's Foreign Ministry stated that it would "never" return to the talks, but now it says it might come back if UN sanctions are lifted, if the topic of negotiation is "true" denuclearization of Korea (i.e., removal of the US nuclear umbrella over the South), and if the United States drops its hostile policy (i.e., by signing a peace treaty with the North). Such conditions hardly merit discussion, since sanctions can only be lifted by the UN in response to North Korean progress on scaling back its missile and nuclear programs, and US security commitments to the ROK are a non-negotiable matter between two sovereign states. Finally, any attempt to formally end the Korean War must be primarily a North-South initiative. The United States can sign a treaty that *supplements* North-South reconciliation, but it cannot move independently of South Korea in this regard.

The September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement exchanged North Korean denuclearization for diplomatic normalization and peninsular peace and prosperity, and those negotiations should pick up where they left off in December 2008. Washington and Seoul should not compromise on this, even if our expectations are low that Pyongyang will change its mind and follow through. There are, however, a number of other steps that can be taken to build confidence and pave the way for resuming talks. The United States has so far resisted taking many of these steps in deference to South Korea, even if it has not said that Seoul is the reason for its reluctance. Now that North Korea has promoted the idea that ending the Korean War and confidence building are vital components of denuclearization, it is time for the allies to be more explicit about what is (and what is not) possible on this front.

For example, in the past few months North Korea has tried to open diplomatic doors to the United States, while keeping those same doors closed to South Korea. In addition to calling for a bilateral peace treaty, Pyongyang has offered to resume assistance with finding the remains of US soldiers missing in action (MIAs) from the Korean War. South Korean proposals last year to set up a similar program were rejected by Pyongyang. Additionally, North Korea has been receptive to the idea floated in US nongovernmental circles for establishing some sort of US diplomatic presence in Pyongyang, but ROK President Lee Myung-bak's suggestion in January that the two Koreas establish a liaison office in each other's capital was dismissed by the North. Some even suggest that a reason why North Korea's national philharmonic orchestra has not yet returned a 2008 visit by New York's orchestra is due to US insistence that Seoul be added to the itinerary (a condition that Pyongyang refuses to accept).

Critics of the Obama administration argue that certain gestures are more innocuous than others, and accounting for MIAs in particular should not depend on the temperature of inter-Korean relations. It is unrealistic, they say, to expect that North Korea will capitulate and suddenly agree to give up its nuclear program on the allies' terms. Interim steps aimed at confidence building and expanding engagement can lead to opportunities to break the impasse over nuclear weapons, signing a peace treaty, and normalizing relations. There is truth in these arguments, but it is overshadowed by the need to put the ROK front and center in the peacemaking process (and for the region to drum that message into North Korean ears).

For decades, North Korea has tried to bypass Seoul and talk directly with Washington. At times the US government has indulged Pyongyang (be it the Agreed Framework in the 1990s or substantive bilateral "six-party" negotiations in 2007 and 2008). The time has come to take a resolute stand against this habit. After all, the fundamental threat to peace in Korea is not the North's nuclear program per se; rather, it is the North's unwillingness to accept the South as its primary partner for peace making. This can't go on.

The United States is scheduled to transfer wartime operational control of ROK forces to the South in 2012, and South Korea's economic, political, and diplomatic voice in the region (and the world) steadily grows – Seoul hosts the G20 summit this year and it holds annual leadership summits with China and Japan. If North Korea is serious about stabilizing

its external relations, it has never been more obvious that this journey starts in Seoul.

But this doesn't mean that the United States should simply defer to South Korea when it comes to dealing with the North. With the South's increased stature comes the responsibility to rise above narrow domestic political battles and pursue wider regional and allied interests. US and ROK officials can better coordinate engagement policies in ways that maximize flexibility and articulate more effectively what kind of relationship with the North is possible under various scenarios. We can put more "meat on the bones" of President Lee's "Grand Bargain" for North Korea. For example, why not clarify that the US will establish a diplomatic presence in Pyongyang after a permanent inter-Korean dialogue channel is established? We can also propose a joint MIA recovery program and other initiatives.

Recent efforts have nibbled at the edges, with small-scale academic and business exchanges involving the three countries. The allies can think bigger and be more aggressive and flexible on this front, comfortable in the knowledge that US solidarity is firm and that the ROK is a capable and mature nation ready to be the North's primary partner for peace. If North Korea refuses to engage the South, it will only isolate itself further and make it easier to contain. If it deals with the South sincerely, then the United States and the ROK must be prepared to step up reconciliation with the North.