

## **Has Strategic Patience Run Its Course?**

by James J. Przystup

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The well-choreographed pas de deux of ROK and DPRK nuclear negotiators in Bali and the visit of North Korea's Senior Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan to New York appear to have rekindled hopes for dialogue with North Korea and a resumption of Six-Party Talks. Pardon my skepticism, but haven't we seen this movie before? Looking over the record of the past two decades, it is fair to ask what are we to talk about now that we have not talked about before.

Three successive administrations have posed essentially the same simple binary choice to Pyongyang: butter or guns? And North Korea's consistent response has been to avoid making the choice and to attempt to go for both: to be both a strong and prosperous country (in North Korean terms) and one with a nuclear capability.

As to the strong and prosperous country, looking ahead to 2012, North Korea appears to be betting on continuing Chinese support. Recently, North Korea and China announced plans for the joint development of special economic zones, this time with the clear commitment and underwriting of Beijing. Last month, China's Minister of Commerce and North Korea's Jang Song-taek participated in groundbreaking ceremonies at one of the new SEZs. During recent conversations in Beijing, Chinese analysts and academics were clear that China's priority in North Korea is stability through the transition; this means back-stopping the DPRK economy. Absent a miraculous immaculate denuclearization, Beijing's concerns are focused elsewhere in North Korea.

At the same time, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs are up and running unimpeded and, as a result, the risks of proliferation grow daily. Last year, the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review warned of the possible rapid proliferation of WMD material, weapons, and technology, from weak or failing states, as posing a direct physical threat to the United States. In January, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told his Chinese counterpart that North Korea's missile program could, in the near future, pose a direct threat to the US. As my former colleague at NDU, Ferial Saeed observed in her paper on Nuclear Diplomacy toward North Korea and Iran. The gap between strategic patience and the warning of the 2010 QDR "is striking."

Meanwhile, North Korea, beyond announcing that it is prepared unconditionally to return to the Six-Party Talks – which really is conditioned on our not asking for an apology for the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeongdo – has evidenced little change in its behavior, and just recently,

by disclosing secret ROK initiatives, blew up any chance for a South-North summit. Indeed, Pyongyang's closing off of a South-North Summit and pivoting to the United States is a tried and true North Korean stratagem for marginalizing Seoul.

Have the meetings in Bali and New York advanced diplomacy to the point where we should consider a mid-course correction from strategic patience, and if so, why? To what end? What benefits are attainable and at what cost?

As to why, several reasons suggest themselves: the lack of success in constraining North Korea's nuclear program, the growing risks of proliferation, the need to discourage North Korean provocations, or encourage positive, responsible behavior, and the need to address North Korea's security paranoia.

Clearly, the longer North Korea continues to assert its status as a nuclear weapon state, the more difficult it will be to realize complete denuclearization. If we remain committed to a denuclearized North Korea as an end state – and I can't imagine that objective changing – is it possible, as Saeed asks, to attain that objective through a staged process, that, in the first phase, would involve capping the North Korean nuclear arsenal, dismantling of the Yongbyon reactor, and securing intrusive international IAEA oversight over all nuclear materials and facilities? In return, North Korea would receive humanitarian aid but "conditioned on consultations with the World on requirements to transition to development aid and private investment." The objective would be "to break the cycle of paying North Korea repeatedly for the same threat, so that aid is not traded solely for nuclear commitments but also for economic progress."

In a second, undoubtedly distant, phase, North Korea would surrender its nuclear arsenal, rejoin the NPT, and normalize relations with the United States.

Can we get there from here and at what cost? Both domestically – with an election coming up here – and internationally, to secure critical support from the ROK, with its own presidential election in the offing, the degree of difficulty of such efforts, measured by Olympic scoring for the high dive, would be a "Ten Plus" in degree of difficulty. And the cost to US credibility in the ROK and Japan in terms of support for the NPT and the global nonproliferation regime could prove incalculable. For the United States to go it alone would reward North Korea's longstanding efforts to drive deep wedges into those alliances.

We cannot deny the risks posed by North Korea's nuclear program, but we can manage them by maintaining strong alliance coordination and cohesion with Seoul and Tokyo by reinforcing our commitment to deterrence and defense, by continuing to work with China and Russia, and by being willing to explore possible openings with the DPRK.

However strained our strategic patience may be, we should not be strategically impatient either. Despite best efforts, some problems cannot be solved when we want, in the way we want; they simply have to be managed.

Now, let me turn to engagement and dialogue as instruments to encourage responsible North Korean behavior and minimize the risk of future provocations. Does this work?

The assumption here is that if we are in dialogue, North Korea will refrain from provocative behavior. Starting from Churchill's premise that talk is better than conflict, it is not clear that dialogue with North Korea has constrained Pyongyang's behavior. The August 1998 Taepodong test came in the middle of negotiations on a missile moratorium. The 2006 nuclear and missile tests came a year after Pyongyang signed the September 2005 Joint Statement committing the North to denuclearization. And the 2009 test came after the Obama administration had announced it was prepared to extend an open hand to states like North Korea.

As for *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeongdo, the incidents appear to be motivated by internal North Korean political dynamics – payback in the case of the *Cheonan* sinking and succession politics in the case of the island attack. Future provocations should be expected, whether we have dialogue or not, because the regime uses such actions to sustain a level of external crisis and rally public support. Succession, accompanied by a generational shift in the power structure, is a particularly sensitive time, as will be the death of Kim Jong il.

As for curing North Korea of its security paranoia, Pyongyang's answer, since the beginning of the Obama administration, has been to prescribe two major bromides: that the United States recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and that Washington deal with the "root cause" of the nuclear problem – its hostility toward the DPRK – and eliminate that malevolence by concluding a peace treaty as a prerequisite for denuclearization. This was reiterated by *KCNA* as Kim Kye Gwan was on his way to New York.

In addressing mutual security concerns, we are on clearly divergent paths.

The North Korean approach is a singular one, dismissing decades of mutual mistrust, suspicion, and enmity, and focusing on the magic bullet of a peace treaty with the United States. Concluding a peace treaty would, for Pyongyang, usher in peace regime nirvana on the Peninsula, which would assuage North Korea's security concerns by obviating the need for a US-ROK alliance or a U.S. presence on the Peninsula and, in the process, marginalize South Korea.

There is another path, a step-by-step process, in effect a "to do list," that *ends in*, rather than *begins with*, a peace regime, which ratifies a pre-existing, de facto state of peace. This would begin with North Korea's denuclearization – it is difficult to conceive of a peace regime with a nuclear armed North Korea. It would also involve implementing the historic 1992 North-South Basic Agreement; replacing the Armistice with either a political agreement or peace treaty to which South Korea would be a signatory. This would normalize relations on the Peninsula and end North Korea's longstanding efforts to delegitimize the ROK.

This is a process that aims at building a peace regime from the bottom-up. The North Korean approach, in contrast, is the diplomatic equivalent of attempting to build a house from the roof down – it simply lacks a foundation.

The United States should not hesitate to explore openings with Pyongyang, but they should be well coordinated with Seoul and Tokyo. Moreover, we should keep expectations modest – health, education, people-to-people exchanges and confidence building measures provide low-profile entry points. Stanford University's medical school is engaged with Chinese and North Korean counterparts in a dialogue on tuberculosis management – a HEW channel could be explored with North Korean health officials. A handful of North Korean students are now studying in the United States; the offer should be made to increase that number. (Where better to learn market economics than at the Becker-Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago?) As for confidence building, the CBMS outlined in the Basic Agreement would go a long way toward creating a real peace regime on the Peninsula. And even less controversial, cultural and sport exchanges can be encouraged. The Los Angeles Lakers in Pyongyang? Why Not? Kim Jong Un is reported to be a basketball fan. How about Ping-Pong diplomacy with a larger ball?

Yet again, our expectations should be modest. Expecting that "new and improved" "active and comprehensive engagement" will now do the trick represents, like third and fourth marriages, a triumph of hope over experience. At the macro-level, North Korea has evidenced little interest in buying what we've been selling – economic opening, reform and prosperity – in exchange for nuclear weapons. But modest initiatives can begin to suggest a different future to the next generation of North Korean leadership.