

Addressing Diplomatic and Military Dimension of North Korea's Nuclear Issue

Yong-Sup Han

Abstract

This paper discusses diplomatic and military dimension of North Korea's nuclear issue. Though the six party talks have made progress in halting the North Korean nuclear program, it may take time for North Korea to agree to its entire elimination. Still, the six party talks, which is the first regional consultation modality to resolve the security issue, can provide a useful venue to address their security issues in the future. The venue is more useful than bilateral or trilateral talks. Six parties can ensure that any military option could come only after all other steps have failed. Nevertheless, there are possibilities of failures if the United States and North Korea blame other four countries for slow progress. In order to avoid such case, South Korea and Japan should strengthen their own deterrence capabilities. They should also explore to coordinate deterrence and defense strategy in such way as analyzing effectiveness of U.S. extended deterrence. Joint effort of Korea and Japan would reinforce negotiating power of five countries vis-à-vis North Korea in the six party talks.

Introduction

As is known, the six party talks among South Korea, North Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia were launched to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and, in recent times, the talks have made significant progress in halting the North Korean nuclear program. Despite ups and downs in the talks, the October 2007 agreement on disabling North Korea's nuclear facilities and programs provides high hope that North Korea will ultimately abandon its declared nuclear facilities and programs and report nuclear fissile materials until the end of this year.

However, it remains to be seen when or whether North Korea will make a strategic decision to eliminate its entire nuclear weapon program including nuclear

weapons and materials in a verifiable and irreversible way. North Korea experts in the world predict that it may take a substantial amount of time until North Korea accepts the complete dismantlement of its nuclear weapons and materials. Therefore, this paper intends to evaluate the diplomatic and military dimensions of the current negotiating approach taken by the six party talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In addition, this paper will shed light on the deterrence aspect of the North Korean nuclear issue from the South Korean perspective.

Diplomatic Approach to the North Korean Nuclear Issue

North Korea's nuclear issue has become a major blockade to the progress in peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. In February 2005, Pyongyang boldly announced that it had possessed nuclear weapons. The world got shocked despite the fact that Pyongyang had been playing the nuclear card for years. Before its official announcement of possession of nuclear weapons, much was left for speculation.

So far intelligence sources have disclosed conflicting views on just how many nuclear fissile materials and weapons North Korea might have possessed: widely ranging from 30 to 50 kilograms of plutonium, from 8 to 10 bombs. Contrary to the general expectation that North Korea would refrain from developing nuclear weapons in light of Washington's punitive attack on Iraq as early as March 2003, North Korea seemed emboldened to accelerate its nuclear weapons development. Pyongyang came to disclose that it has been developing nuclear weapons not only for the deterrent purpose but because of the economic stringency that can not provide resources to compete with South Korea and the United States in terms of military balance.

South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia laid out common strategy to bring North Korea to the six party talks after ups and downs after the eruption of the second nuclear crisis in October 2002. Six countries managed to produce the September 19th 2005 Joint Statement to make North Korea promise to abandon its nuclear weapons and related programs. The September 2005 Joint Statement called for North Korea to commit to "abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs."

The Joint Statement also commits "the directly related parties" to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at a separate forum. During the 1990s, the four party talks among South Korea and North Korea, the United States

and China had been held in Geneva and collapsed due to North Korea's refusal to continue the four party talks unless four countries agreed to discuss withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea. It has been true for four decades since Pyongyang has denied South Korea being a legitimate partner in peace talks. Instead, North Korea kept on insisting that North Korea and the United States be legitimate partners for peace talks on the Korean Peninsula to terminate the armistice regime. Pyongyang's primary goal concerning the peace treaty had been to isolate South Korea and undermine the ROK-U.S. security alliance.

However, the October 2007 inter-Korean summit showed a clue as to how the North Korean view on who are the legitimate partners to the Korean peace regime talks has been changing. As stipulated in the October 2007 South-North Joint Statement, North Korea, for the first time, changed its long-held position by agreeing to the fact that three-party or four-party will hold the summit meeting to terminate the armistice regime and to build a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula including the declaration of the end of the Korean War.

Therefore, South Korea is now anticipated to participate in the future peace forum as a legitimate and legal partner as recognized by North Korea. Nevertheless, peace building process will also take a long time because of a great deal of differences in the approaches of four countries. The Korean peace process, in essence, is comprehensive because it entails tension and threat reduction on both sides of the two Koreas and the U.S. forces in Korea, in return for security guarantees to North Korea and corresponding provision of economic assistance to North Korea.

After the September 2005 Joint Statement, the six party talks has been stalled for more than a year because of growing divergence of six countries. In particular, the Bush administration pursued to transform the North Korean regime out of recognition that nothing is possible to denuclearize North Korea under the Kim Jong Il regime. It is equally true that since the advent of the George W. Bush administration, North Korea has stepped up its anti-U.S. propaganda, saying that North Korea's strengthening of its deterrent power was a wise decision to cope with Washington's hard-line policy toward Pyongyang. It appears that North Korea felt strategically vulnerable against Washington's threat of preemptive war or use of nuclear weapons. Out of its anxiety that its economic stringency cannot provide resources to compete with South Korea and the United States in terms of conventional military balance, the North Korean leader may have come to the conclusion that his regime should pursue weapons of mass destruction, no matter what incentives the external world provides to North

Korea. For the security of its regime, North Korea paradoxically believes that it requires nuclear weapons.

According to a report produced by the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations,¹ Pyongyang's attitude toward nuclear weapons has hardened over time, especially since February 2003. The report writes that Pyongyang's appeals for negotiations have been mixed with an increasing number of statements defending its right to produce nuclear weapons. Thus, it may or may not be open to serious negotiations. In the aftermath of the war on Iraq, Pyongyang may have concluded deterrence is better attainable through nuclear weapons than through negotiations with the United States.

Ironically, Pyongyang insisted upon concluding a non-aggression pact with the United States as a *quid pro quo* to its abandonment of its nuclear weapons program. Therefore, the September 19th Joint Statement provided North Korea with the U.S. security assurances by stating that the United States has no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons. In addition, Pyongyang was interested in normalizing relations with Washington, Washington's lifting of economic sanctions against the DPRK, plus energy and financial compensation. Nervously and very dangerously, Pyongyang has been playing a nuclear game with a risk-seeking mindset while seeking a negotiated settlement.

Despite initial progress in the September 2005 agreement, North Korea continued to develop nuclear weapon program, whereas the United States imposed financial sanctions on North Korean bank accounts in Banco Delta Asia in an apparent effort to transform the North Korean regime.² This confrontation resulted in a stalemate in the six party talks. This impasse culminated in North Korea's nuclear test. After North Korea's nuclear test, the United Nations Security Council with the Japanese initiative, France, the United Kingdom, the United States joined by China and Russia unanimously passed the Resolution 1718 to impose sanctions on North Korea. The Chinese government issued a harsh statement criticizing North Korea as "brazen." Beijing joined the UN Security Council resolution by banning money transfer to North Korea, while showing a policy shift to treat North Korea as a part of normal state-to-state relationship away from the past special relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang.

¹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Meeting the North Korean Nuclear Challenge*, May 19, 2003, online at www.cfr.org/publication_print.phpid.

² Scott Snyder, "U.S.-North Korean Negotiating Behavior and the Six Party Talks," in Seung-Ho Joo and Tae-Hwan Kwak eds., *North Korea's Second Nuclear Crisis and Northeast Asian Security*, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007, pp. 157-158.

Faced with the new situation of North Korea's nuclear test and its loss in the mid-term Congressional election in the United States, the Bush administration adopted the engagement policy to hold direct talks with Pyongyang by abandoning the until-then policy of confrontation, that is, not allowing direct talks with Pyongyang. Such an abrupt change in Washington's North Korea policy enabled a corresponding change in Pyongyang's attitude toward its nuclear policy. As a result, the February 13 accords came out.

The February 13th 2007 accord is read like the following: The six parties agreed to take coordinated steps to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement in a phased manner in line with the principle of "action for action." In the initial phase, North Korea will shut down and seal for the purpose of eventual abandonment the Yongbyon nuclear facility, including the reprocessing facility and invite back IAEA personnel to conduct all necessary monitoring and verifications as agreed between IAEA and the DPRK. The DPRK will also discuss with other parties a list of all its nuclear programs as described in the Joint Statement, including plutonium extracted from used fuel rods, that would be abandoned pursuant to the Joint Statement. On the other hand, North Korea and the U.S. will start bilateral talks aimed at resolving pending bilateral issues and moving toward full diplomatic relations. The U.S. will begin the process of removing the designation of North Korea as a state-sponsor of terrorism and advance the process of terminating the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act with respect to the DPRK. North Korea and Japan will start bilateral talks aimed at taking steps to normalize their relations in accordance with the Pyongyang Declaration, on the basis of the settlement of unfortunate past and the outstanding issues of concern. The six parties also agreed to cooperate in economic, energy and humanitarian assistance to the DPRK. Later, South Korea agreed to transport emergency energy assistance equivalent to 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil (HFO) to North Korea. The six countries agreed on the establishment of the five Working Groups (WG) in order to carry out the initial actions and for the purpose of full implementation of the Joint Statement: Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula; Normalization of DPRK-U.S. relations; Normalization of DPRK-Japan relations; Economy and Energy Cooperation; Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism.

However, the deadline of sixty days for initial actions to be taken by North Korea elapsed with more than six months and the six countries never reached the agreement as to how they would define the second phase of disabling North Korea's nuclear program, not to speak of the next stage of dismantling North Korea's nuclear program and weapons. If not completely belated, the six countries held the second session

of the sixth round of the six party talks in late September 2007 in order to assess the initial phase of actions and define the second phase of actions to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement.

On October 3rd, the six countries agreed to the process and contents on second-phase actions for the implementation of the Joint Statement of 19 September 2005 after confirming the implementation of the initial actions provided for in the February 2007 agreement. On the issue of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea agreed to disable all existing nuclear facilities subject to abandonment under the September 2005 Joint Statement and the February 13 agreement.

According to the October 2007 agreement, the disablement of the 5 megawatt Experimental Reactor at Yongbyon, the Reprocessing Plant (Radiochemical Laboratory) at Yongbyon and the Nuclear Fuel Rod Fabrication Facility at Yongbyon will be completed by 31 December 2007. The United States will lead disablement activities and provide the initial funding for those activities. As a first step, the U.S. side will lead the expert group to the DPRK within the next two weeks to prepare for disablement. The DPRK also agreed to provide a complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear programs in accordance with the February 13 agreement by 31 December 2007. This implies that North Korea is required to report all nuclear fissile materials including weapon grade plutoniums regardless of their state either for already made weapons or left plutonium (highly enriched uranium, if there exist). North Korea's faithful and full report of nuclear fissile materials will be put to test of its reliability for the rest of the year and beyond. The DPRK reaffirmed its commitment not to transfer nuclear materials, technology, or know-how. On the other hand, the United States and North Korea committed to improving their bilateral relations and moving towards a full diplomatic relationship. These steps will include removing the designation of the DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism and terminating the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act with respect to the DPRK. North Korea and Japan will make sincere efforts to normalize their relations expeditiously in accordance with the Pyongyang Declaration, on the basis of the settlement of the unfortunate past and the outstanding issues of concern.

Evaluation of the Six Party Talks So Far

On the diplomatic front, the six party talks have demonstrated a lot of merits in spite of their procrastinated process. Since the six party talks mark the first regional

consultation and cooperation modality to resolve the most serious security issue, that is, the North Korean nuclear issue in the history of the region. Indeed, despite lingering concerns about North Korea's complete and verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons and weapon grade materials, it holds great promise.

First, the six party talks are better than two- or three- or four- party talks not only in resolving the North Korea's nuclear issue but also in providing a useful venue for six countries in the region to address their security issues in the future. Since the North Korean nuclear issue became regional or global beyond the Korean Peninsula, five countries had to engage North Korea in a collective voice to resolve such issue. Such a multilateral modality stands a better chance for a negotiated settlement by having participating countries put restraint on their own positions to draw a collectively good outcome from the talks.

Second, given what North Korea demands in return for its forgoing the North Korean nuclear card, the venue is more useful than bilateral or trilateral talks in making a bigger pie of inducements by aggregating what the other five countries are willing to provide to North Korea.

Third, five countries' pressure on North Korea is more effective in persuading Pyongyang to relinquish its nuclear card by not allowing Pyongyang to escape by relying on split tactics as Pyongyang used to play.

Fourth, the venue provides a lot of options for six countries to utilize in combination of two- party or three- party, four- party talks under the larger six party framework. Such utility is already shown in the form of the four party forum that will address the peace regime agenda in the future. The six party talks proved to be useful in resolving the North Korea's frozen bank accounts in the Banco Delta Asia by having Russia provide assistance to North Korea. Russia had an interest in getting the process going.

Fifth, six parties can ensure that steps to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem will be so incremental and reciprocal that any military option could only come after all other steps have been thoroughly taken. In return, North Korea will be forced to remain committed to the progress in the six party talks instead of balking at the process.

Nevertheless, there are inherent demerits in the six party talks mainly because they are multilateral. The primary reason for the delay in the process is attributable to North Korea's planned tactics in playing time against its compliance with denuclearization. There are also other reasons like the following.

First, since the six party talks is so multilateral that it will take more time to resolve the North Korea's nuclear issue entirely. The North Korea's bank account issue has long delayed the process for more than a year in its return to the process. As of now, Japan's attachment of the abduction issue to the six party talks seems to slow down the process. It is also uncertain which issue will pull the pace of the six party talks. As an opposite case in point, the political climate change in the United States last year November precipitated the progress in the six party talks by enabling Washington to reverse its original position that did not allow direct talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

Second, although the United States and North Korea are key players in resolving the North Korea's nuclear issue, they can put a blame on other participating countries for a slow progress in the six party talks. Pyongyang used to blame Tokyo for their stubbornness to stick to the abduction issue whereas the primary reason of the slow progress is attributed to Pyongyang's salami tactics of dividing the nuclear issue into many parts and using each part to maximize their benefits.

Third, in each step toward resolving the North Korea's nuclear issue, five other countries need to consult what they need to provide Pyongyang's leadership.

In sum, the success of six party talks hinges on who does what and when through what kind of sequential implementation. The next six party talks will have to address the issues of verifying the truth of North Korea's declared list of its nuclear programs, nuclear fissile materials, and nuclear weapons, specifying plans, measures, and procedures to dismantle them in order to achieve a complete denuclearization of North Korea. In parallel, the other five countries will have to agree to what incentives they will provide North Korea in a *quid pro quo* to North Korea's complete and verifiable dismantlement of its nuclear programs and weapons.

- North Korea should declare all nuclear programs, materials, and weapons and promise to dismantle its nuclear weapons and facilities.
- Six parties should agree to impose verifications on North Korea and North Korea should accept such verifications as agreed upon by six parties.
- Five parties should agree what economic and security incentives they will provide to North Korea on condition that North Korea dismantle its nuclear weapons and programs and North Korea should accept the agreements.
- North Korea's return to the NPT and verification of North Korea's compliance of non-nuclear North Korea should precede North Korea's use of nuclear energy

for peaceful purposes.

- Six party talks should continue until and after they achieve a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula and are turned into a regional security cooperation mechanism.

Most experts in the world think that the North Korean leadership has not yet reached the strategic decision to eliminate its nuclear programs and weapons. The disabling phase dwells on already declared facilities and harbors a lot of suspicion as to how much North Korea will report to the U.S. verification team concerning their holdings of nuclear fissile materials. Therefore, the six party talks will hang on until Kim Jong Il makes a strategic decision.

Deterrence Aspect of the North Korean Nuclear Issue

It is critical that South Korea and Japan should make efforts to redefine their respective deterrence and defense strategy to meet with the North Korean nuclear challenge for the security and stability of South Koreans and Japanese in close consultation with the United States. Immediately after the North Korean nuclear test, the U.S. President Bush reaffirmed the U.S. nuclear umbrella to South Korea and Japan. However, the South Korean side needs to make endeavors to deter and defend against North Korea's tangible nuclear threat.

Though possessing nuclear weapons is believed to be the best way to deter the opponent country's nuclear weapons, it is realistic and pragmatic that South Korea had better rely on the United States ally for its application of extended deterrence to the Korean Peninsula. Inter alias, South Korea keeps on abiding by the denuclearization policy in accordance with the Denuclearization Agreement of the Korean Peninsula of February 1992, though the North Korean counterpart ignored the agreement.

Since the United States has developed its new nuclear deterrence strategy, so called, tailored deterrence strategy to meet with newly emerging threats such as regional proliferators like North Korea and Iran, and the possibility of spread of nuclear weapons into the hands of the terrorist network, South Korea and Japan will need to analyze its relevance to the Korean and Japanese theater in order to make the best out of it. In responding to North Korea's nuclear threat, South Korea and Japan will need to consider the possibility of North Korea's use of nuclear weapons in terms of their deterrence and defense planning though some people deny the possibility of North Korea's nuclear weapon use in the warfighting at all.

No doubt that a nuclear capable North Korea may exercise a full range of war planning by combining conventional war and nuclear war. Though North Korea repeats the rationale for its nuclear weapons only for deterrence purpose, it is unreliable in which direction a nuclear capable North Korea will go.

Therefore, it is also necessary to analyze effectiveness and utility of American tailored deterrence and extended deterrence strategy in light of the North Korea's nuclear threat. Nevertheless, applying the U.S. preemption doctrine to the Korean theater was pointed out to be more problematic than useful. In fact, South Korea, Japan, and China showed a strong opposition when the issue of the U.S. preemptive strike was raised in 2003.

Regarding the deterrence by denial or by retaliation, governments of Japan and South Korea need to strengthen its own deterrence capabilities including modernizing conventional posture and active defense posture such as C4ISR capabilities and missile defense system. At the same time, Seoul and Japan need to strengthen their respective alliance with the United States to ensure the U.S. assurance of deterrence.

Civil defense drills and combined exercises against North Korea's nuclear use are also required together with raising nationwide attention and support for neighboring countries' strong defense and deterrence. This will reinforce negotiating power of five countries (South Korea, Japan, the United States, and even China and Russia) in the six party talks whose principal aim is to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapon related materials and programs in a complete, irreversible and verifiable manner.

Conclusion

Northeast Asia is the region where the multilateral security cooperation is long overdue. This region was entangled with divided countries due to the Cold War legacy, rising nationalism, potential territorial disputes, historical animosities, diverging national interests, and different political and economic ideologies. So far, countries in Northeast Asia have largely depended on their bilateral alliances for their security rather than promoting security cooperation on a multilateral basis.

Nevertheless, movements are under way to promote multilateral security cooperation by capitalizing upon growing economic interdependence among countries in the region and by exploring chances for making the best out of the ongoing six party talks. The six party talks among South Korea, North Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia have been launched to resolve the North Korea's nuclear

issue and as of now, the talks made some progress to halt North Korean nuclear program. Despite ups and downs of the six party talks, the October 2007 agreement on disabling North Korea's nuclear facilities and programs provides such a sign of hope that the six party talks may evolve into the regional security cooperation regime in the future.

In the meantime, the diplomatic and multilateral approach needs a lot of patience and time until they achieve the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea. In order to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia in the aftermath of North Korea's nuclear test, it is critical that South Korea and Japan redefine and strengthen their respective deterrence strategy and capabilities to meet with new challenges stemming from North Korea. This factor will entail the strengthening of their respective bilateral alliance with the United States. For defense planners in this region, nobody can feel safe and secure until North Korea actually eliminate its nuclear weapons and programs. Until then, there are lots of huddles down the road to North Korea's denuclearization, thereby requiring countries' close consultation and cooperation for the same goal of North Korea's denuclearization.