

Briefing Memo

Forecasting the Obama Administration's Policy towards North Korea

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In his inauguration speech on 20 January 2009, the new president of the United States Barack Obama showed a conciliatory stance towards the leaders of dictatorships and undemocratic states, stating "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." What kind of policy towards North Korea is aimed at by the US Democratic administration of Obama, following the Bush administration, which came to an end halfway through the second stage of the denuclearization of North Korea?

The Obama administration's policy towards North Korea: a mixture of comprehensive engagement plus military hedging.

President Obama has declared from the time of the presidential election campaign that he would "hold dialogue unconditionally with North Korea," and has taken actions including the dispatch of aide-level experts to North Korea. Following this, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated in her speech at the Asia Society, prior to her visit to Japan on 13 February, "The North Korean Government has committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and to return at an early date to the Treaty on Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons. We continue to hold them to those commitments. If North Korea is genuinely prepared to completely and verifiably eliminate their nuclear weapons program, the Obama administration will be willing to normalize bilateral relations, replace the peninsula's longstanding armistice agreements with a permanent peace treaty, and assist in meeting the energy and other economic needs of the North Korean people."

During a joint press conference on the Japan-US foreign ministerial meeting held on 17 February, Secretary of State Clinton went on to state, "The abductee issue is part of the Six-Party Talks, and we believe it should be, because it is more likely to yield to progress as part of a comprehensive engagement with North Korea," indicating that the United States intended to deal with the abduction issue at the Six-Party Talks, and at the time positioning United States' policy towards North Korea as part of the "comprehensive engagement."

In an interview with newspaper journalists on the same day, Clinton acknowledged with regard to the North Korean missile issue that “the missile issue could be part of the agenda at the Six-Party Talks.”

In terms of human resources, Secretary of State Clinton appointed Stephen Bosworth, the former first executive director of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization and former United States ambassador to North Korea, to the post of special representative for North Korea Policy on February 26. On this occasion, Bosworth stated, “We plan to openly adopt a policy of engagement towards North Korea. I personally visited North Korea in the earlier part of this month [February], and judged that the North Koreans have discovered that it would be to their profit to engage with the world, and are prepared to move forward,” while also reconfirming that the objective of the Six-Party Talks was “complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.”

With regard to the United States’ policy towards North Korea and North-South relations, Secretary of State Clinton stated at the US-Korea foreign ministerial joint press conference on 20 February that “[in relation to the announcement by North Korea on 30 January that it would discard all previously existing agreements with South Korea] We firmly believe that North Korea must live up to the commitments it made in the 2006 Joint Statement and other agreements. North Korea is not going to get a different relationship with the United States while insulting and refusing dialogue with the Republic of Korea,” declaring that no normalization of US-North Korean relations could be hoped for while North Korea refused North-South dialogue, and indicating that the United States respected the intentions of South Korea.

Following this, Defense Secretary Robert Gates commended the Six-Party Talks to a certain degree at the recent public hearing nominated by the Senate Armed Services Committee, stating, “On North Korea, the Six-Party Talks have been critical in producing some forward momentum—especially with respect to North Korea’s plutonium production,” but went on to add “I don’t think anyone can claim to be completely satisfied with the results so far. These talks do offer a way to curtail and hopefully eliminate its capacity to produce more plutonium or to enrich uranium, and reduce the likelihood of proliferation. Our goal remains denuclearization, but it is still to be seen whether North Korea is willing to give up its nuclear ambitions entirely.”

In response to a question on recent reports relating to North Korea’s preparations for launching long-range missiles, Gates replied, “Should it be judged to be necessary, [missile defense] is one option.”

In terms of human resources, Gates named Ashton Carter as Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology & Logistics. Ashton Carter had served as deputy to former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry during the administration of Bill Clinton, and has attracted attention for his co-authorship, together with Perry, of the essay “If Necessary, Strike and Destroy” in June 2006, prior to the missile launch tests by North Korea.

Finally, with regard to the United States’ military engagements in South Korea, with the US-South Korea joint exercises continuing under the direction of General Walter Sharp, commander of US forces in Korea, who took up his post in South Korea last year, the United States has continued to provide the already-existing “nuclear umbrella” (as part of extended deterrence) to South Korea and has not been lagging in its preparations to enable South Korea to deal with a variety of contingencies in the Korean Peninsular.

Looking at the above, it may be predicted that the Obama administration’s policy towards North Korea will consist of “a policy of comprehensive engagement” as symbolized by the words of Secretary of State Clinton, but that the administration will also take a pragmatic response of “engagement and hedging” towards North Korea’s military strengthening, whereby the United States will refuse to back down in military terms in the face of aggression. It is implied in this “comprehensive engagement” that there is leeway in the framework of the Six-Party Talks to handle the abduction issue and the missile issue. In the last two years of the Bush administration, attention was focused on the disablement of North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear facilities, and there was a sense that the issues of uranium enrichment and concerns over nuclear proliferation on which the Bush administration had initially focused its attention had, in effect, been put on the back-burner. However, since the effective term of the Obama administration will last for another four years, or perhaps eight depending on circumstances, it is easy to imagine that it will first of all attempt to establish a position capable of responding comprehensively to the issue.

The stance of North Korea towards the Obama administration

In the meantime, what is the attitude of North Korea towards the Obama administration? North Korea has desired direct negotiations with the United States, centering on the nuclear issue, since the breakup of the Cold War structure and the Soviet Union. On 13 January prior to the formal inauguration of President Obama, the press secretary for the North Korean Foreign Ministry issued a statement aimed at the Obama administration, stating, “Unless the United States eliminates its hostile policy and nuclear threat towards North Korea, North Korea will never relinquish its nuclear weapons first,” and that “If the United States eliminates its nuclear threat, and ends its nuclear umbrella towards South Korea, North Korea likewise will have no need for nuclear weapons.” The

press secretary for the North Korean Foreign Minister went on to state on 17 January that “If the United States thinks that the price to be paid for the normalization of North Korea-US relations is North Korea’s relinquishment of its nuclear weapons, it has made a miscalculation. We began to produce nuclear weapons not because we hoped for the normalization of relations with the United States or for its economic assistance and the like, but in order to defend ourselves from the United States’ nuclear threat. The true situation of the Korean Peninsular is that it can go on existing without the normalization of relations with the United States, but it cannot go on existing without its nuclear deterrent.” He further stated, “The nuclear issue of the Korean Peninsular is in essence the issue of the United States’ nuclear weapons versus North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Even if there were to be complete diplomatic normalization of North Korea-US relations, our position as regards possessing nuclear weapons would not change in the slightest as long as the United States nuclear threat remains to any degree whatsoever.” In this manner, North Korea continues as before to emphasize direct dialogue with the United States, and is hardening its stance that it will not readily relinquish its nuclear weapons.

As mentioned previously, Bosworth has assessed that the North Koreans are prepared to move forward, but the above statements of North Korea lead one to expect that future direct dialogue between the United States and North Korea will be fraught with difficulties.

The general principle of “action for action” and the four policy measures

Even assuming that the Obama administration will develop a “policy of comprehensive engagement” going forward, the measures which it actually takes will vary depending on the actions taken by North Korea. If the Six-Party Talks are maintained, three options other than the “policy of comprehensive engagement” may logically be envisaged under the Talks’ general principle of “action for action”: appeasement, coercion and regime change by military force.

Appeasement is a policy which involves authorizing North Korea as a nuclear power, normalizing diplomatic relations, concluding a permanent peace treaty, and taking measures for promoting large-scale energy and economic assistance, having essentially disregarded the basic principle of “action for action.” Incidentally, the Bush administration elected to delist North Korea from the list of states that sponsor terrorism, and alleviate the provisions of the Trading with the Enemy Act.

Coercion is a policy which makes military options and non-military sanctions (economic sanctions etc.) explicit, and promotes the denuclearization of North Korea through setting such sanctions in motion. However, in the event that the final objective of such a policy is regime change, this policy may also be referred to as “regime change by non-military force.”

Regime change by military force is a policy which goes beyond the objective of denuclearization, aiming to transform the country from a dictatorship into a democratic structure through the execution of military force. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq under the Bush administration may be considered to correspond to this policy.

In terms of the “hedging” in the “engagement and hedging” alluded to above, with the US-South Korean joint exercises continuing under General Walter Sharp who took up his post in South Korea last year, it is clear that the United States is envisaging a wide array of scenarios with regard to North Korea including the adoption of the military option. Taking this point into consideration, it appears that the Obama administration is in fact taking a pragmatic stance towards North Korea, in which it takes the “policy of comprehensive engagement” as a basis, while also keeping hold of the military option in preparation for a worst-case scenario.

It may be added with regard to the “policy of comprehensive engagement” that it is not unfeasible that North Korea will be denuclearized through US-North Korea bilateral dialogue and the Six-Party Talks under the general principle of “action for action,” and that in this process, US officials or the president will visit North Korea and take measures including the normalization of diplomatic relations, the conclusion of a permanent peace treaty, and the implementation of large-scale energy and economic assistance. Incidentally, under the administration of Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited North Korea, and preparations were made for President Clinton himself to visit the country, but the visit was never realized due to the end of the administration’s term.

Conclusion

The fact that the destination of the first overseas visit of Secretary of State Clinton was an Asian country gives the impression that the initial diplomatic and security policy of the Obama administration will emphasize Asia; however, as might be expected, the highest priority in the United States’ diplomatic and security policy as a whole is likely to be placed on the Middle East and Central Asia, including Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. In the Asian region, the strongest emphasis is likely to be placed on China in relation to economic issues including financial issues, and the Obama administration will probably be forced to respect China’s role in the case of North Korea too, as was the case at the time of the second Bush administration. Ultimately, having inherited the task of carrying on the step-by-step measures towards the denuclearization of North Korea left by the Bush administration, the administration will probably undertake the “policy of comprehensive engagement” through the Six-Party Talks, initiated by Sung Kim, Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks, and direct dialogue with North Korea centering on Bosworth. It is likely that a three-party

policy coordination framework of Japan, the United States and South Korea will be given the role of complementing this process. However, should the United States be forced to take more heavy-handed measures against North Korea, it is likely that the US-South Korea alliance and the US-Japan alliance will have a central function in this.

For Japan's responses to mid-range/long-range missile launches by North Korea, including the operation of the missile defense system, it is of course necessary to discuss what responses should be taken in the event that North Korea restarts its nuclear tests, or in the event that the United States embarks on the normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea and the like. At venues for Japan-South Korea discussions and Japan-US-South Korea discussions, Japan must also make approaches to ensure that the missile issue and abduction issue are discussed proactively as agenda items for the Six-Party Talks. In the position it accords to the Japan-US alliance, the Obama administration goes beyond the traditional recognition of the alliance as "the lynchpin of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region," sometimes expressing it in more global terms as "the cornerstone of the United States' foreign policy." It is to be hoped that with Japan too striving to fulfill a more global role as an ally of the United States, Japan will cooperate with the United States more closely in the various security issues associated with North Korea.

(Completed on 2 March 2009)

The purpose of this column is to respond to readers' interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS. A "briefing" provides, among other things, background information. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex issues involved in security affairs.

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