

DPRK Nuclear Programs and Regional Responses

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The nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula has become one of the focal points in the current global campaigns against nuclear proliferation. Since the disclosure of the North Korean nuclear weapon programs in October 2002, the relevant parties have made efforts to defuse the tensions on the peninsula. The second round of the six-party talks was held on February 26-28, 2004 and the pattern of the current interactions remains nuclear programs versus security concerns. The approach under deliberation is still within the framework of economic compensations and security assurances for dismantlement of nuclear weapon programs. Currently, the interactions remain within the context of the six-party talks. China's mediating efforts have been encouraged and supported by all the other parties in this regard. Our current problem is how to push forward the process of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula within the context of the six-party talks and how to maintain peace and stability permanently on the peninsula.

Background of the Current Nuclear Crisis

The current nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula is a complicated process and has its multi-facet nature. To address the issues related to the current crisis, we have to look into three dimensions of its nature or background.

Firstly, the current crisis is a legacy left over by the Cold War. Although the Cold War globally ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Cold War mechanism remains on the Korean Peninsula. The security mechanism on the peninsula has been based on the armistice agreement signed after the Korean War. The efforts were made to replace the current armistice treaty with a peace treaty through negotiations during the four-party talks in the 1990s, but they were unable to reach the goal.

Secondly, hostility and confrontation have begun to give way to engagement and détente in the relations between North and South Korea. Although the North-South military confrontation remains in terms of international law, it has been transformed into the one between the DPRK and the United States. Since the Bush Administration came to power, the DPRK has been part of the “Axis of Evil”, the target of the US nuclear strike in its report of the Nuclear Posture Review, the state sponsoring international terrorism, and

the WMD proliferator. This administration has pursued a hostile policy towards the DPRK. The DPRK has, in turn, seen the United States as its archenemy. Since the current crisis occurred, President Roh Moo Hyun of the ROK has claimed that the ROK has acted as a mediator rather than an ally between the DPRK and the United States. During the current nuclear crisis, the North-South ministerial meetings have made substantial progress in reducing suspicion and promoting cooperation. While the Bush administration hasn't ruled out any options in dealing with the North, President Roh has rejected the possibility of starting a military strike or imposing sanctions. The Bush administration regards ROK's approach as injurious to the alliance.

China has actually acted as a mediator rather than a DPRK ally during this crisis. Russia has also played a mediating role, while Japan has its own agenda as a US ally.

Thirdly, the ongoing crisis is the continuation of the 1993-94 nuclear crisis which led to the Framework Agreement between the United States and the DPRK, the KEDO with the construction of two light-water nuclear reactors, the four-party talks involving the United States, China, North and South Korea, and the South-North summit in 2000. The engagement process ended with Secretary of State Albright's trip to Pyongyang, and the would-be Clinton-Kim summit. The implementing processes within the framework of the 1994 framework agreement were the bilateral and multilateral ones. The process was suspended with the policy review decision after the Bush Administration came to power in early 2001.

Nature of the DPRK Nuclear Weapon Programs

The nature of the DPRK nuclear weapon programs can be assessed in terms of its Plutonium-generating program, the uranium-enriching program and its missiles developing program.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported in the past that North Korea had enough plutonium on hand in the early 1990s to make one or two nuclear weapons. But it is a matter of some uncertainty. There is no persuasive evidence that North Korea possesses these nuclear bombs.

In December 2002, after the US announced the suspension of the oil supply, North Korea reopened a 5-megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon that was shut down under the 1994 Agreed Framework. North Korea removed monitoring equipment from the site, expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, and withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It was reported that North Korea might be removing spent fuel rods from a storage facility at its Yongbyon nuclear complex. The report said the North might transfer the rods to a reprocessing plant and they could be converted into enough weapons-grade plutonium for several nuclear bombs by summer 2003.¹ During the visit of the US delegation in December 2003, North officials tried to let members of the delegation believe it. North Korea showed them the material that is supposed to be plutonium.

The CIA has also reported that North Korea has tried to obtain technology and equipment needed to enrich uranium and the North can use highly enriched uranium to make two or more bombs a year. The United States contends that North Korea admitted

to a U.S. envoy in October 2002 that it had a uranium-enriching program. The US has been unable to locate the whereabouts of the project. It is widely reported that North Korea received information and equipment related to uranium enrichment from Pakistan, in exchange for ballistic missile parts. North Korea has repeatedly denied that deal. However, the recent disclosure of the Qadeer nuclear leakage increases such suspicion.

The DPRK officials claimed that they have already acquired the nuclear deterrent. It is still unknown whether it is its capability or the nuclear weapon. Experts are uncertain about whether the DPRK actually wants to build up an atomic arsenal or whether it is just what the US has called the “nuclear blackmail”, trying to deter a pre-emptive strikes by the United States. Even though the US insists that it has no intention to attack the North, Pyongyang seems worried that it might be next after Iraq.

North Korea has ballistic missiles capable of reaching Japan and South Korea. North Korea has developed and sold ballistic missiles, equipment, and related technology. It has exported ballistic missiles and related technology for hard currency. It is often reported that North Korea has sold missiles or related technology to countries such as Iran, Syria, Libya, and Pakistan.

The Bush administration is committed to resolving the North Korea crisis peacefully and has insisted that the North must completely, verifiably, and irreversibly abandon its nuclear weapons programs. The Bush Administration has said that it has no hostile intent towards the North Korea, has no intention to launch a military strike against North Korea, and has no intention to change the regime in Pyongyang. The DPRK has showed its willingness to freeze its nuclear programs as the first step in dismantling them. It demands that the US abandon its hostile policy towards the DPRK, remove it from the State Department’s register of the states sponsoring terrorism, and lift economic sanctions against the DPRK. Lack of mutual trust between the US and the DPRK is the serious barrier to the settlement of the current nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

Current Development of the Korean Nuclear Crisis

The latest nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula broke out in October 2002, when the United States confronted North Korea with evidence that it was enriching uranium. But the DPRK has denied the existence of the uranium enrichment program. The tensions between the US and the DPRK intensified dramatically. During this period, the North Koreans once insisted on bilateral talks with the U.S., while the U.S. advocated multilateral talks with the five countries. Later on, Russia joined the Five.

With China’s active coordination and mediation, the first round of the six-party talks took place in Beijing in August 2003. Consensus was reached on the first round of the six-party talks for exploring the approach to defusing the ongoing crisis. The most striking points are the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons and peaceful settlement of the current nuclear crisis.

At the first round of the six-party talks, the six participants agreed that the peninsula should be denuclearized and North Korea’s security concerns should also be addressed, the current crisis should be settled by peaceful means and neither side should take

provocative actions, and simultaneous or parallel steps should be taken in seeking just and reasonable resolution of the crisis. Before the meeting, the U.S. insisted that the North Koreans should first stop their nuclear weapon programs, while the North Koreans insisted that the U.S. should first give up its hostile policy and promise to sign a non-aggression treaty. The core of the crisis is to abandon the nuclear weaponization programs for security assurances and economic compensations. The key actors of the crisis are the United States and the DPRK.

Just after the end of the first meeting of the six-party talks, North Korea stated that the talks were useless and it would not attend the second meeting. Then North Korea insisted that Japan should be excluded from the future six-party talks because Japan intended to settle their bilateral issues at the talks. In October 2, 2003, North Korea announced that it had finished reprocessing its 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods. North Korea also claimed that it had solved "all of the technological matters" for making nuclear weapons. Diplomats and intelligence officials dismissed North Korea's claim that it had finished reprocessing the rods as "rhetoric" and "posturing." However, it is difficult to obtain conclusive intelligence about North Korea's nuclear activities.

The US reactions are mixed and confused. Secretary of State Colin Powell said on October 3 that it was the third time they had told the US they had finished reprocessing the rods, and the US had no evidence to confirm that. But new intelligence estimates that North Korea may have produced one or two nuclear weapons in recent months. Some of President Bush's advisers say it is possible that North Korea is telling the truth about having turned 8,000 nuclear fuel rods into enough weapons-grade plutonium for several warheads. But all these estimates cannot be confirmed by evidence. In June 2003, evidence collected by American satellites and sensors that capture a gas, krypton 85, released during reprocessing hints that additional nuclear facilities exist. The facilities are thought to be in the mountains close to the Chinese border, and perhaps in underground tunnels. But intelligence officials have been unable to verify those presumptions. However, the international estimates have not assessed whether the DPRK could convert it into a working bomb. North Korea has threatened to test, but has never tested a nuclear weapon. No one knows for certain how big the North Korea's arsenal is.

Recently, encouraging progress has been made in the joint diplomatic efforts. Both the DPRK and the United States have desisted from their declared positions. President Bush promised to provide the North Korea with a regional "written security assurances" to be signed by the relevant participants, while North Korea responded to President Bush's remarks by agreeing to participate in the next round of the six-party talks and desisted from the non-aggression treaty with the United States. The DPRK has further put forward a proposal that it would freeze its nuclear programs and even stop its nuclear power generation in exchange for U.S. aid and removal from Washington's roster of states sponsoring terrorism. Secretary of State Colin Powell has called the offer a "positive step." The DPRK has also invited a non-official US delegation to visit its nuclear facilities to show its "nuclear deterrence". All these developments have increased our confidence and optimism about the current process of the six-party talks.

At the second round of the six-party talks, substantial progress was made with

seven-point agreement issued in the form of the Chairman's statement. There are four important points: (1) The six parties insist on nuclear free Korean Peninsula as its final objective; (2) they insist on peaceful settlement of the nuclear crisis on the peninsula; (3) All the parties promise to coexist peacefully; (4) All the parties agree to create a working group preparing the next round of the six-party talks and the third round of the talks will be held before July, 2004.

At the meeting, as the first step, the DPRK proposed halting its nuclear weapon program for economic compensation and security assurances from the other participants. The ROK, China and Russia promised to provide energy assistance with certain conditions. The Bush Administration wants the North Koreans to dismantle their nuclear programs first. The DPRK condemned the US of lack of sincerity for resolving the issue.

Approach for the Future of the Korean Peninsula

At the first and second rounds of the six-party talks, all parties reached the consensus that the Korean Peninsula should be denuclearized, the current nuclear crisis should be settled by peaceful means, and all the relevant parties should refrain from taking provocative actions leading to escalation of the tensions. While North Korea is boasting of their nuclear capabilities, it leaves some room for future maneuvers with the U.S. by agreeing to abandon its nuclear programs. Many analysts believe that recent North Korean actions are intended to increase pressures upon the other participants to meet its demands that its security concerns and economic aids should be definitely guaranteed. Its strategy is to obtain security assurances from the U.S.

But analysts have warned that the U.S. is fully occupied in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the DPRK may be expanding and improving its nuclear arsenal and delivery systems in the coming months, triggering escalation of the tensions. The Bush Administration's strategy is to rely on pressure from China and other participants to force North Korea to stop its nuclear programs. The U.S. continues its multilateral approach and policy coordination among its allies in the region. It seems that this administration has not prepared to make substantial concessions in the coming talks.

The Bush Administration, there has been the debate on the Korean nuclear issue, and no consensus or compromise has been reached between the hawkish and the dovish factions. The hawkish faction has insisted on the military approach and the "5030" plan was disclosed by the US media in May 2003. The dovish faction has preferred the diplomatic approach. In a recent telephone interview, Mr. Powell said, "We have some ideas, some interesting ideas, about how we can move forward on providing some security assurances to the North Koreans that might open up some new possibilities." During President Bush's trip to Asia, he personally talked about his willingness to provide "written security assurances" if the DPRK abandons its nuclear weapon programs in a way of irreversibility and verifiability. The reaction highlighted Bush's strategy of patience and unflappability shaped partly by design and partly by necessity. Now President Bush is facing a tough reelection campaign and irritating military resistances in Iraq and elsewhere. This administration can't afford another war during this term. President Bush is unlikely to abandon his stated goal of achieving a diplomatic

solution to the crisis in the foreseeable future.

However, for the past few months, Libya has openly declared its willingness to give up its nuclear weaponization programs and Iran has signed the additional protocol of the NPT and promised to put its peaceful nuclear programs under the IAEA inspections. The new developments have encouraged the Washington hawks to take tougher steps to force the DPRK to give up its nuclear ambitions. One of the steps is economic sanctions and maritime blockade by implementing the Proliferation Security Initiative.

The other nations involved in the talks - China, Russia, South Korea and Japan - are even more eager to avoid a military showdown that could trigger hostilities, floods of North Korean refugees, or even a decision by Japan or South Korea to get their own nuclear arms. Thus all five nations have an interest in keeping the process of the six-party talks going and making sure the negotiations do not collapse. Policy recommendations for the approach for scrapping North Korea's nuclear programs can be divided into three phases:

The first phase: Denuclearization

The new agreement can be the agreement on denuclearization and security assurances and economic compensations on the Korean peninsula. The Korean nuclear issue should be settled within the context of the six-party talks based on the achievements of the Framework Agreement with the KEDO. The new arrangement should correct the previous flaws of the Framework Agreement with the conditions of verifiability and irreversibility. The new agreement should target at the dismantlement instead of "freezing" of the nuclear weapon programs. "Written security assurances" agreement should be signed by all the participants, including respecting DPRK's state sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression against each other, peaceful settlement of the disputes through negotiations among the participants without using or threatening to use military force. As inspection and supervising measures, the participants should discuss whether the IAEA will get involved with the six-party team. We should realize that it is difficult to accept the US, Japanese, and ROK members of the monitoring team of the six countries.

Frankly speaking, to persuade North Korea to give up its right to acquisition of nuclear weapons, the nuclear weapon possessors, including the U.S., have to offer necessary incentives for compensation, including their security assurances. They have to promise not to use their nuclear weapons to threaten North Korea, help North Korea in acquiring and using civilian nuclear technology for generating electric power.

At the second round of the talks, the differences reflect lack of mutual trust between the United States and the DPRK. All the parties should establish confidence-building measures by increasing contacts, narrowing differences and expanding consensus in the future talks. They should adopt a constructive stance, behave in a cooperative and accommodating spirit, and take a flexible and practical attitude in pushing forward the process of the talks. They should conduct the dialogue in the spirit of mutual respect and on an equal footing.

The Korean nuclear issue is a complicated one, which needs a long process to resolve. To make the talks a success, the following factors must also be considered.

The United States and the DPRK are the key actors in the whole process of the talks. The success or failure will be determined by their attitudes, sincere efforts, and mutual confidence. The favorable environment should be created for DPRK-US bilateral contacts within a multilateral framework. After all, the US-DPRK relationship is the most crucial in this crisis. Without sincerity and willingness to make compromises on their parts, the six-party talks will be difficult to reach the final goal.

Just one day after concluding the second round of the talks, in its first official reaction, North Korea's foreign ministry said it was "difficult to expect any further talks would help find a solution to the issue."ⁱⁱ The statement underlined the big differences between the US and the DPRK following the four days of talks. A joint statement by the six countries failed to materialise because of North Korean opposition to the wording.

Concurrently, Alexander Losyukov, Russia's representative at the talks, said that he thought the nuclear issue was unlikely to be resolved this year. "There are political factors involved here," he said. "Before the US election the North Korean problem is unlikely to be solved."ⁱⁱⁱ

The six-party talk is a long and complicated process. It may take a long time to achieve a satisfactory solution. Mutual distrust is deeply rooted in the minds of the policymakers of the United States and the DPRK and it is the biggest impediment. The DPRK, learning lessons from the Iraq war, is unlikely to give up its nuclear agenda without obtaining security assurances. The Bush Administration is also unlikely to offer its security assurances before it believes that the DPRK has actually given up its nuclear programs. It is crucial to bridge this huge gap between the two key actors.

The second Phase: Peace and Stability

During this phase, the central issue is how to implement the agreement. To maintain peace and stability permanently on the peninsula, the six-party mechanism should negotiate on the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace agreement on the basis of implementation of the denuclearization agreement. At this phase, establishment of diplomatic relationship between the participants should be encouraged and accomplished. This proposed peace agreement is a regional security arrangement, assuring permanent peace and security on the Korean Peninsula.

The Third Phase: Economic Cooperation and Common Prosperity

On the basis of the multilateral and regional security mechanism, economic development and cooperation should become the top priority on the future regional cooperation. All the participants should encourage DPRK's economic reform and openness. The process of DPRK's economic reform should be put into the process of Northeast Asian economic cooperation and integration.

Conclusion: Beyond the Korean Nuclear Dilemma

We should recognize the difficulties in the global efforts against nuclear proliferation. According to the NPT, nuclear weapons are temporarily legal in five countries, not illegal in three others, and forbidden essentially everywhere else,

including Iran and North Korea. It is clear that the NPT itself is a complex and inconsistent arrangement that presents a unique set of dilemmas in its implementation.

While we are talking about the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, we need to think about the NPT regime itself. North Korea signed the NPT in 1985 and has been caught twice escaping its obligations. During the current nuclear crisis, it announced the withdrawal from the NPT in January 2003. This announcement came into force this June. In order to resolve North Korea's nuclear weapon programs, let's look back at the course of nuclear proliferation and some models of settling the nuclear weaponization programs in the world. We may obtain some revelation and lessons from them.

Since the NPT was signed in 1968, five states have obtained nuclear weapons through their secret nuclear weapon programs. They are Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa, and perhaps North Korea. The first three have not signed on to the treaty and developed their nuclear weapons programs after the signing of the NPT, so their possession of such weapons can be regarded as neither legal nor illegal in terms of international law and norms. South Africa gave up its nuclear weapons and joined the regime as a non-possessor. Argentina, Brazil, South Korea, and Taiwan ceased their suspected nuclear weaponization programs under the international pressures. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine inherited nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union, but decided to relinquish them in favor of joining the NPT. Iraq had a clandestine nuclear weapons program that was detected and largely dismantled as a result of the first Persian Gulf War. Today, Iran and North Korea are reported to be the only states actively seeking nuclear weapons. Under international pressures, Iran has agreed to put its nuclear programs under the supervision of the IAEA and North Korea has been bargaining for its survival from the security threats.

Many arms control experts believe that the NPT regime has worked better and longer than expected but nevertheless needs to be improved and revised to better handle new challenges under the current circumstances. Moreover, It is very important for the major powers concerned to coordinate and cooperate with each other in their efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. Historical experiences demonstrate that it is very difficult to achieve such a goal without concert efforts of the major powers concerned. More importantly, one of the crucial conditions in the efforts of preventing WMD is that the nuclear haves should promise not to threaten to use WMD against the nuclear haven'ts.

ⁱ The New York Times, January 31, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Asia Times, March 1, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Asia Times on line, March 1, 2004.