

The Obama Administration and Preparations for North Korean Instability

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Abstract

Kim Jong-il's alleged health problems in the fall of 2008 have had mixed effects on North Korea's foreign policy and the responses of the United States and South Korea, among others, to the ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis. This paper explores in detail the implications of Kim Jong-il's health scare for U.S. policy, including specific aspects of policy implementation that may have implications for U.S. efforts to respond to possible future political instability in North Korea. Second, the paper will identify current challenges and dilemmas facing U.S. policy toward North Korea and analyze how these challenges interact with concrete policy initiatives that might be taken to prepare for possible future instability in North Korea. Finally, the paper will draw some conclusions regarding the Obama administration's preparations for and assumptions regarding prospects for instability in North Korea and how those assumptions are influencing the formation of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

Key Words: North Korea contingency planning, Obama administration, U.S.-DPRK relations, counter-proliferation, denuclearization

Kim Jong-il's failure to appear at the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on September 9, 2008 provided the basis for public speculation regarding his health, and by extension, about North Korea's leadership succession process and the future of North Korea. Kim Jong-il's health scare revived debates about the implications of possible instability in North Korea that had swirled in the mid-1990s, during the period of succession between North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il's health problems also had apparent ramifications for U.S. policy toward North Korea at the end of the Bush administration, as North Korea took a hard stance at the end of the Bush administration against allowing verification of any of its nuclear sites in the course of implementation of the second phase of commitments under the February 13 and October 4, 2007, agreements under the Six-Party Framework. Specifically, in return for provision of 950,000 tons of heavy fuel oil (HFO) or the energy equivalent, North Korea was to provide a "complete and correct" declaration of its nuclear facilities. The United States attempted to negotiate provisions for verification inspections in response to its willingness to take North Korea's name off the terrorism list and drop North Korea from the Trading With the Enemy Act, but this process stalled out as the Obama administration prepared to come into office.

As a result, the situation inherited by the Obama administration was particularly complicated. The North Koreans had not fully completed the implementation of denuclearization commitments made during the Bush administration; nor had the other five parties completed their obligations to North Korea. Moreover, the North Korean foreign ministry spokesman declared prior to President Obama's inauguration that

denuclearization and normalization were matters that could not be linked, a direct challenge to the Six-Party Talks Joint Statement and a unilateral assertion of North Korea's nuclear weapons status as a fait accompli.¹ Following this statement, the North Koreans undertook a series of provocative actions that resulted in escalating tensions during the first half of 2009, including the launch of a multi-stage rocket using ballistic missile technology in violation of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1718, the conduct of a second nuclear test, and a series of other shorter-range missile tests.

These hardline actions all took place amid speculation regarding Kim Jong-il's health. A dominant perception was that many of North Korea's provocative actions may have been driven by domestic political factors within North Korea, including the possibility that these provocative actions may have in part been driven by Kim Jong-il's preparation to place his third son Kim Jong-un as North Korea's next leader.² The holding of a meeting of the National People's Assembly in April of 2009 was accompanied by institutional changes including the expansion of the National Defense Commission to include Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law Jang Song-taek and leaders of other public security services, the promulgation of a new constitution, and an internal propaganda campaign to lay the groundwork for Kim Jong-un to be placed as Kim Jong-il's successor.

For the Obama administration, North Korea's unremitting series of provocations and the accompanying escalation of tensions framed the

¹- "DPRK Foreign Ministry's Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion," *KCNA*, January 17, 2009.

²- Scott Snyder, "What's Driving Pyongyang? North Korean Nukes" *Oriental Economist*, July 2009, http://www.orientaleconomist.com/documents/snyder_on_nkorea.pdf.

North Korean issue primarily as a nuclear and missile non-proliferation issue, but it also raised questions about the possibility and implications of North Korean instability. Thoughts of early engagement evaporated in light of North Korea's provocative actions, and uncertainty regarding Kim's health added to the apparent complexity of the situation. The immediate need to respond to North Korean provocations has framed the policy response of the Obama administration in terms of nonproliferation and denuclearization; i.e., the need to respond to the challenge posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear tests.

Kim Jong-il's health scare has also re-introduced the issue of contingency planning for North Korean instability as an early priority of the Obama administration that has thus far been undertaken primarily in the form of renewed military coordination efforts between the U.S. Forces Korea and Ministry of National Defense counterparts under the Lee Myung-bak administration. However, as Kim Jong-il reemerged onto the political scene, contingency planning appears to have been left behind somewhat as the political focus of policy debates has shifted back in the direction of how, when, and whether to pursue diplomatic engagement with North Korea. In the months following Bill Clinton's meeting with Kim Jong-il to secure the release of two American reporters detained in North Korea, Americans appear to be somewhat reassured that Kim Jong-il is in command, and discussions of the need for contingency planning have been replaced by speculation regarding renewed diplomatic engagement. At a security forum in Washington in September 2009, Admiral Timothy Keating, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, referred to Kim's appearance at the meeting as "great intelligence" revealing the leader as "cogent and capable of entertaining reasonable discussions,"

and acknowledged that “we were less certain of those capabilities than we now are.”³

Now that Kim Jong-il has apparently recovered, assumptions regarding his own viability can cut both ways as an influence on policy formation: on the one hand, North Korea’s tilt toward hard-line provocations during the period when Kim seemed not to be fully in control could be a catalyst for more robust U.S. engagement on the assumption that it would be easier to negotiate North Korea’s denuclearization under Kim than under a harder-line successor or in an environment where the path to succession remains contested; on the other hand, it is also possible to assume that since Kim Jong-il’s days are numbered and the likelihood that North Korea will give up nuclear weapons without regime change is low, the best U.S. option is to focus on containing North Korea’s threat while waiting for a new, more moderate leadership to emerge in the future.

This paper will explore in detail the implications of Kim Jong-il’s health scare for U.S. policy, including specific aspects of policy implementation that may have implications for U.S. efforts to respond to possible future political instability in North Korea. Second, the paper will identify current challenges and dilemmas facing U.S. policy toward North Korea and analyze how these challenges interact with concrete policy initiatives that might be taken to prepare for possible future instability in North Korea. Finally, the paper will draw some conclusions

³-Timothy Keating, “A Combatant Commander’s Perspective on Security in the Asia-Pacific,” remarks at Military Strategy Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, September 15, 2009, http://csis.org/files/attachments/090915_transcript.pdf.

regarding the Obama administration's preparations for and assumptions regarding prospects for instability in North Korea and how those assumptions are influencing the formation of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

U.S. Policy Objectives and the Prospect of Instability in North Korea

U.S. short-term policy objectives are inevitably influenced by internal developments in Pyongyang, especially as it influences the realm of the possible in responding to North Korea's nuclear challenge. The prospect of instability in North Korea heightens uncertainty regarding regional and international stability. The United States has three primary objectives in its policy that could be affected by North Korean instability: to achieve denuclearization and nonproliferation both in Korea and globally; to support peaceful political and economic transition in North Korea including through U.S.-DPRK normalization and the North Korea's integration with the international community; and to maintain the U.S. commitment to regional peace and stability in East Asia.

North Korean Denuclearization and Global Nonproliferation

The primary long-term objective of U.S. North Korea policy remains "complete and verifiable denuclearization," as specified by Ambassador Bosworth during his first trip to Seoul in March 2009 as Special Envoy.⁴ In the event of sudden regime collapse in the North, the

⁴-Stephen W. Bosworth, Special Representative for North Korea Policy, Afternoon

priority U.S. interest would lie in securing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs); i.e., “loose nukes.” North Korea’s aggressive efforts to obtain a nuclear deterrent pose a direct challenge to the regional and global non-proliferation regime and to the Obama administration’s current global nuclear-arms reduction efforts. While the United States will not accept a nuclear North Korea, the Obama administration seems to face limited policy options for “breaking the pattern” of failed negotiations as Pyongyang shows no indication of giving up nuclear weapons in the near term, a challenge exacerbated by U.S. commitments in managing tensions with other troubled regimes like Iran. There is widespread pessimism in Washington that North Korea can be convinced through negotiations to give up its nuclear weapons, but the administration continues to insist that North Korea affirm its commitments to denuclearization contained in the September 2005 Joint Statement. Ahead of President Obama’s trip to Asia in November, Jeffrey Bader, the National Security Council’s Senior Director for East Asian Affairs, expressed the administration’s willingness to talk directly to North Korea “with the explicit goal of denuclearization and with recognition that its previous commitments to denuclearize and return to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, notably those in 2005, remain valid.”⁵ Another recent study by Joel Wit advocates that the U.S. approach toward a North Korea in transition should thus be based on a “gradual and phased” process of denuclearization and elimination of the

Walkthrough in Seoul, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, March 9, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2009/03/120194.htm>.

⁵-Jeffrey Bader, remarks at “Obama Goes to Asia: Understanding the President’s Trip,” The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, November 6, 2009, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/1106_obama_asia/20091106_obama_asia_trip.pdf.

North Korean WMD threat in order to meet realistic progress.⁶

North Korea's Peaceful Transition and Integration with the International Community

The United States would like to see North Korea embark on a peaceful process of economic and political integration into Northeast Asia as a means of enhancing North Korea's stability and prosperity, as opposed to continued provocations and confrontations by Pyongyang as a hostile or failed state. At his summit meeting with Lee Myung-bak on November 18, President Obama clearly stated that if North Korea is willing to take steps toward denuclearization, "the United States will support economic assistance and help promote its full integration into the community of nations. That opportunity and respect will not come with threats."⁷ President Obama's statement strongly parallels Lee Myung-bak's Grand Bargain proposal. The two leaders agreed to "closely consult on how to elaborate and implement" this "definite and comprehensive resolution." Many American specialists would like to see the United States facilitate North Korea's economic reform and opening in line with international norms, accompanied by a normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations.⁸ As the nuclear issue is brought under control, U.S. progress in

⁶-Joel Wit, "U.S. Strategy toward North Korea: Rebuilding Dialogue and Engagement," U.S.-Korea Institute, SAIS and Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University, October 2009, <http://uskoreainstitute.org/pdf/specialreports/NKstrategy/NKreportOCT09jwit.pdf>.

⁷-Remarks by President Barack Obama and President Lee Myung-bak in Joint Press Conference, Seoul, November 19, 2009.

⁸-Bradley O. Babson, "Transformation and Modernization of North Korea: Implications for Future Engagement Policy," Nautilus Institute, October 2009, <http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKPolicy/Babson.pdf>.

diplomatic normalization with North Korea will strongly depend on progress in inter-Korean relations and in Pyongyang's ties with other U.S. allies in Asia. Pending progress on denuclearization, it is a core interest of the United States to promote North Korea's economic development as a means of achieving the long-term stability of North Korea and the region through a political solution that is mutually acceptable among all players.

East Asian Regional Peace and Stability

The possibility of instability in North Korea poses a clear threat to U.S. regional security interests in East Asia as continued North Korean provocations under a fragile regime risk escalation into broader regional conflict. Pyongyang's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons as a tool for national strength raises concerns over a possible arms race in Northeast Asia. In addition to the regional security and economic challenges, a crisis in the North might possibly lead to unintended conflict between the United States and China in the effort to protect respective interests on the Korean peninsula and could even have negative effects on South Korean stability.⁹

Diplomatic coordination among the United States, China, and South Korea is essential in planning for possible contingencies in North Korea; the United States and China are South Korea's primary diplomatic partners in dealing with North Korea as signatories of the 1953 Korean War Armistice. Although the United States has attempted to establish some principles for three-party coordination in response to potential instability

⁹-Scott Snyder and Joel Wit, "China Views: Breaking the Stalemate on the Korean Peninsula," USIP Special Report No. 183, February 2007.

in North Korea, seeking assurances that the Chinese military will not cross the Yalu River into the North, and guarantees that South Korea would lead coordination of humanitarian operations in the North, the possibility of trilateral discussion on this issue at any level remains a sensitive issue.¹⁰

U.S. Strategies toward Possible Instability in North Korea

Kim Jong-il's health scare, or the possible future emergence of a new leader in North Korea, is unlikely to change the main objectives of U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula. While pursuing U.S. objectives listed above, the Obama administration has responded to the prospect of instability in North Korea in the following ways:

1. Greater attention to military aspects of contingency planning

Initial U.S.-ROK joint efforts to consider the military implications of instability in North Korea occurred in the late 1990s in the context of North Korea's famine. At that time, it became clear that North Korea's weakness and possible collapse could pose challenges as significant as those deriving from North Korea's strength. As a result, U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) developed OPLAN 5029-98. However, that plan was not updated and received little attention under engagement-oriented progressive Korean administrations led by Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.

¹⁰- Jay Solomon and Jason Leow, "Beijing Spurns U.S. Effort to Prepare in Event of Korea Leader's Demise," *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2008.

In fact, political differences blocked the establishment of a revised operational plan under the Roh administration. Concern regarding Kim Jong-il's health and the possibility of another leadership succession has catalyzed renewed efforts by USFK and the Lee administration to develop a full plan to respond to possible North Korean contingencies.

Amid heightened tensions from Pyongyang's missile launch earlier this year, President Lee reportedly requested the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) to finalize OPLAN 5029 by the end of April as a full-fledged joint action plan to respond to various internal instability situations in the North. USFK Commander General Walter Sharp affirmed that his command was working with South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staffs on a plan that would include specific actions to deal with North Korean refugee inflows, civil war, the detainment of South Korean hostages in North Korea, and natural disasters, as well as measures to prevent the smuggling of WMDs out of the North.¹¹ More recently under the joint operational plan, U.S. and ROK militaries have agreed that U.S. forces will take the lead in securing and eliminating WMDs in North Korea in the event of instability, even after the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the United States to South Korea in April 2012. General Walter Sharp has indicated that the new OPLAN 5029 includes various scenarios where "the U.S. military will take charge of WMD elimination works if needed" while both U.S. and ROK forces will engage in contingency operations "jointly or independently in accordance with emerging

¹¹-Jung Sung-ki, "S. Korea, U.S. Chart Contingency Plans on N. Korea," *The Korea Times*, April 22, 2009, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/09/205_43632.html.

situations.”¹²

2. Greater emphasis on counter-proliferation to contain ongoing North Korean provocations

North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests have highlighted the need to contain and retard the North’s nuclear and missile program development efforts. UNSC Resolution 1874 provides an authorization for member states to take aggressive measures to block both North Korean import and export of materials that could be used as part of North Korea’s nuclear and missile development programs. Efforts by UN member states to implement sanctions both unilaterally and multilaterally should reduce North Korean proliferation activities and deter North Korean trade in nuclear and missile-related items while pressuring Pyongyang to reengage with the international community at an early stage.

While Chinese and Russian support remain critical for the effectiveness of international sanctions, previous limitations of enforcement despite approval in the UNSC suggest that the United States must also continue to lead independent actions to sanction North Korea, especially given recent North Korean violations of UNSC Resolutions. In cooperation with its allies and the international community, the United States should more aggressively implement efforts to block North Korean nuclear and missile-related trade through implementation of both the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and UNSC Resolution 1874, which includes a strong call upon member states to strengthen enforcement to stop North Korean suspicious cargo.

¹²-Jung Sung-Ki, “U.S. To Remove N. Korean WMDs in Contingency,” *Defense News.com*, November 5, 2009.

On the other hand, the North Korean nuclear crisis and the international response may also compel North Korea to pursue closer economic ties with China and trading partners who remain isolated from the international system as suggested by recent North Korean efforts to restructure its external economic relations in an effort to minimize the impact of traditional sanctions.¹³ Unilateral and multilateral sanctions alone may prove insufficient to pressure the North to abandon its nuclear weapons in the short run given the regime's continued top priority of developing its military capacity and nuclear deterrent. However, more aggressive U.S. and international efforts to implement financial sanctions on North Korea as seen in the past may still serve to boost limited leverage over North Korea.

3. Renewed diplomacy with a harder edge

Continued U.S. efforts to reengage North Korea with the international community through both bilateral and multilateral dialogue remain important both for strengthening diplomatic coordination in anticipation of new negotiations and for laying the groundwork for more effective coordination of positions during a pre-contingency phase.¹⁴ Joint efforts among dialogue partners in preparing for contingencies in the North will be essential as a means by which to manage potential regional tensions by

¹³-Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Sanctioning North Korea: The Political Economy of Denuclearization and Proliferation," Working Paper 09-4, Peterson Institute for International Economics, July 2009, <http://www.iie.com/publications/wp/wp09-4.pdf>.

¹⁴-See-Won Byun, "North Korea Contingency Planning and U.S.-ROK Cooperation," Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, September 2009, <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DPRKContingencyCUSKP0908.pdf>.

building trust and minimizing misperceptions.

4. *Coordination with U.S. allies*

As outlined by Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, the U.S. strategy toward East Asia remains firmly based on its bilateral alliance network in the region in addition to strengthened engagement with regional multilateral organizations and increased cooperation with China.¹⁵ U.S. strategies toward managing potential instability in North Korea will require strengthened alliance coordination on contingency planning. Washington must first continue to reassure South Korea and Japan, its key Asian allies most directly affected by a potential crisis in North Korea, of its conventional and nuclear defense commitments in the region especially in light of renewed concerns over the implications of China's rise. The Obama administration's recent declaratory statements indicating the continued viability of the U.S. extended deterrent, unwillingness to accept a nuclear North Korea, and support of renewed dialogue on North Korea, have importantly served this effort to reinforce U.S. security assurances to Asian allies. The Joint Vision signed between Presidents Obama and Lee on June 16, 2009 was significant for including a statement that "The continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, reinforces this assurance."¹⁶ Such efforts are also important for preventing new efforts by South Korea or

¹⁵-James B. Steinberg, "Engaging Asia 2009: Strategies for Success," remarks at the National Bureau of Asian Research Conference, Washington, DC, April 1, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2009/121564.htm>.

¹⁶-*Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea*, Washington, DC, June 16, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/.

Japan to pursue their own nuclear capabilities as advocated by Conservative camps in both countries while in turn easing Chinese concerns over a potential nuclear arms race in the region.

5. *Coordination with China*

Policy coordination with China at the earliest stage of contingency is a critical challenge since China is the external party that has the potentially greatest direct impact on the Korean peninsula. The experience of the Korean War makes clear the possibility that the United States and China might have conflicting strategic interests in the event of instability on the peninsula, underscoring the importance of efforts to understand in advance respective strategic concerns and priorities. In the event of a power vacuum in North Korea, China, the United States and South Korea will be watching each other very closely for signs of undue intervention on the part of the other side. At the same time, the United States may feel a compelling interest in securing North Korea's WMD during a time of crisis, but China could read any such intervention as an early signal that the United States is pursuing strategic aims in the North that China might feel are unacceptable.

Given the continued challenge of engaging Beijing in any meaningful dialogue on managing instability in North Korea, it would be desirable for the United States in cooperation with South Korea to pursue quiet discussions with China focusing on practical issues of intervention, such as humanitarian operations, based on mutual understandings of respective interests and capabilities.¹⁷ Premier Wen Jiabao's recent visit

¹⁷ - Michael Finnegan, "What Now? The Case for U.S.-ROK-PRC Coordination on North Korea," PacNet No. 48, Pacific Forum CSIS, September 11, 2008.

to Pyongyang as part of efforts to launch a broad agenda for North Korea's economic development has highlighted the need to coordinate such efforts with the U.S. approach toward North Korea, even to the extent of jointly analyzing how and whether Wen's efforts were fully in accord with the spirit of UNSC Resolution 1874.

U.S. and South Korean experts remain divided over the likelihood and desired extent of Chinese intervention in securing North Korea's WMDs in particular. While Chinese military intervention in the event of instability in the North could be triggered only by certain factors such as North Korean request, the loss of control over refugees, and U.S. or South Korean unilateral intervention, China as well as Russia as nuclear powers under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) may also have strong interests in securing and eliminating WMDs in North Korea, especially given their physical proximity to North Korean nuclear sites. U.S. military intervention in cooperation with South Korea outside a UN framework in response to North Korean collapse would heighten Chinese concerns over potential threats to its national security interests especially if viewed as an initial move toward a longer-term agenda for reunification.

Obama Administration Challenges and Dilemmas in Policy toward North Korea

The Obama administration has taken some steps to address the prospect of North Korean instability as addressed above, but there is a fundamental set of questions that has not been adequately addressed: what is the Obama administration's strategic vision regarding the end state of the Korean peninsula? On a practical basis, under what conditions

will it weigh in decisively in favor of Korea reunification, and what are the limits of U.S. willingness to pursue such a policy?

The June 2009 Joint Vision Statement contained a strong endorsement of the idea that the United States and South Korea are on the same page in pursuing “a peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy.”¹⁸ This is a fine rhetorical statement of principles in theory, but its implementation may face concrete obstacles in practice. There are two factors that limit the ability of the two countries to achieve clarity in implementing the Joint Vision Statement (or ultimately to provide effective assurance to South Korean allies). First, it is impossible to determine in advance the exact scenario and international circumstances under which such a development might be possible. As a result, it is hard to say with certainty whether there might be opposition for instance, from China, that might make aspirations for Korean reunification impossible or achievable but at a higher cost than the United States is willing to bear. Who would have the upper hand in assuring the prospect of Korean reunification as a matter of political reality on the ground? China’s proximity to the Korean peninsula may provide it with leverage to shape reality on the Korean peninsula regardless of American or South Korean aspirations.

Second, the United States and South Korea have not yet been able to achieve a prior understanding regarding how to pursue a coordinated political response to instability scenarios in North Korea that would provide context for making the decisions that would guide the imple-

¹⁸-*Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea*, Washington, DC, June 16, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/.

mentation of a coordinated military plan. South Korea may have a Ministry of Unification, but there is no such counterpart within the U.S. government, and it is hard to find a unit within the U.S. government that might be effectively tasked to coordinate on such an issue.

Ultimately, the political context for any such decisions will be set by the White House and the Blue House, but the U.S. National Security Council does not have a long-term policy planning capacity (or appetite) to engage in such discussions. One might imagine that the National Intelligence Council or the Policy Planning Office at the Department of State would have the analytical capacity to consider parameters for U.S. policy on these issues, but it is not clear that the work of either of these offices would prove decisive or binding on political decisions made at the White House in the heat of a crisis. Moreover, if circumstances were to develop under which Korean reunification was in the realm of possibility, the German experience suggests that a political decision will be made by the South Korean president based on his own judgment of circumstances at that moment, and is unlikely to be guided by policy papers or long-term studies prepared by his government. For these reasons, a coordinated political understanding would be difficult to achieve in advance in part because there is no capacity within the U.S. government that would be dedicated to providing long-term planning or coordination to inform in advance such political decisions and in part because the outcome of such a political decision is impossible to predict without having better knowledge of the context in which the specific political decisions are being made.

As the Obama administration prepares to reengage diplomatically with North Korea, there is a second-order set of challenges and decisions

that the administration must make that will be influenced at least in part by its views regarding the viability of both Kim Jong-il and of the North Korean system. The remainder of this section will explore this issue in three dimensions: a) how to weigh the relative benefits and weight of bilateral versus multilateral engagement, b) the relative emphasis of administration policy on nonproliferation versus denuclearization, and c) the extent to which the administration attempts to promote sanctions/containment versus incentives/engagement as tools of its policy toward North Korea.

a) Bilateral versus Multilateral Engagement

The Obama administration has decided to pursue bilateral talks “in the context of the six-party process,”¹⁹ but the relative weight that one places on bilateral talks and the expectations that one might reasonably hold for bilateral engagement are influenced in part by perceptions that the North Korean government is a viable and coherent counterpart. This perception certainly influenced the first Bush administration, which arguably wished for regime change in North Korea and as a result was hesitant to pursue diplomatic engagement with North Korea on the basis of the idea that such engagement would ‘legitimize’ North Korea as a negotiating partner. The situation in the early months of the Obama administration has been the opposite, although it is arguable that North Korea’s leadership sees bilateral engagement with the United States at least in part as a means by which to enhance its own legitimacy and stature

¹⁹-Stephen Kaufman, “United States Willing to Meet Bilaterally with North Korea,” *America.gov*, September 11, 2009, <http://www.america.gov/st/eap-english/2009/September/200909111164037esnamfuak9.756106e-02.html>.

in the international community. Likewise, U.S. reluctance to engage positively has been interpreted by the North Koreans as evidence of what it calls the U.S. “hostile policy.”

North Korea appears to have concluded that multilateral engagement is hostile to North Korean interests, especially in the context of the use of international pressure in the form of the UNSC resolutions condemning North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests. In this sense, multilateralism has become the vehicle for a type of pressure against North Korea that the North Korean leadership may perceive as threatening to its core interests, and therefore designed to bring about change in North Korea. To a certain extent, this is a correct perception. The North Korean counterstrategy appears to be to enhance bilateral engagement, especially since separate bilateral deals with neighbors, especially those involving resource transfers, serve as material support that can help shore up the economic if not the political viability of the regime.

Perceptions of regime viability may have an influence on the relative weight that the Obama administration ultimately places on bilateral versus multilateral approaches to dealing with North Korea. If Kim Jong-il is perceived as facing a serious time deadline due to health concerns, the Obama administration may want to reach out bilaterally in order to test the possibility of coming to an understanding regarding North Korean denuclearization in hopes that it would also be binding on his predecessors, presuming that Kim Jong-il comes to the conclusion that he needs to strike a deal before it is too late. Or, the Obama administration may decide to minimize direct engagement and emphasize multilateral talks if it reaches the conclusion that Kim Jong-il will not deal and that his time horizon for making and implementing agreements is too

short. Of course, this will not be the only assumption underlying the direction of the Obama administration's policy, but it is arguable that assumptions regarding the question of leadership succession and its influence on prospects for denuclearization will have a bearing on the implementation of the Obama administration's policy going forward.

b) Denuclearization versus Nonproliferation

Asian analysts seem obsessed with the question of whether or not the Obama administration is committed to denuclearization. This perception is influenced in part by the time horizon and level of urgency that the administration seems to assign to the objective of denuclearization, which is in turn influenced by the administration's assessment of both the likelihood of successful negotiations and the viability of North Korea as a negotiating counterpart in the longer term.

The longer the time horizon for pursuing denuclearization, the higher the likelihood that such a time frame is supported by assumptions that the North Korean leadership is viable and unwilling to give up its nuclear weapons, or that the chances of convincing North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons under Kim Jong-il or any successor leadership are low. If such a time frame is pushed too far out (for instance, beyond the policy time horizon of the administration in question), it may be possible to infer that the administration has decided that denuclearization is too hard to achieve in a reasonable time frame, that the only viable approach is containment, and that the United States faces the realistic necessity of living with a nuclear North Korea for the foreseeable future, even if it maintains a rhetorical policy in opposition to North Korea's *de facto* nuclear weapons status. In this case, diplomacy (either through bilateral

or multilateral talks) becomes a tool for crisis management and a means by which to constrain but not necessarily to reverse North Korea's nuclear program. Containment may be useful as a component of counter-proliferation, but political realities suggest that even with a robust containment option, there is a limited likelihood that U.S. policy efforts can do more than slow (versus capping or reversing) North Korea's continued nuclear development.

Active efforts to pursue denuclearization on a shorter time horizon, both through negotiations and through the promotion of increased political pressure and regional cohesion, suggest the assumption that North Korea's denuclearization is possible through a combination of active diplomacy and regional cohesion designed to step up the pressure to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table. Such an approach may or may not assume that North Korea is likely to collapse, but it also doesn't fear the possibility that a North Korean collapse or temporary heightened tensions or even conflict may be necessary in order to achieve the objective of denuclearization. At a minimum, the pursuit of such a policy requires a willingness to envision the possibility that under certain circumstances North Korea will in fact change its nuclear weapons policy in response to the right combination of pressure and diplomatic negotiations. Such an approach may assume either that the counterpart remains viable or that there is a possibility that the current leadership may be replaced by a leader with whom it is possible to reach and implement a deal on the basis of diplomatic negotiations.

c) Containment versus Engagement

The question of which tools to use in dealing with North Korea clearly is influenced by each country's assessment of the viability of the North Korean regime and the particular policy objective that each country is pursuing based on an assessment of North Korea's regime viability. For instance, Chinese leaders have made clear their preference for incentives and engagement as a primary approach in their policy toward Pyongyang as part of an effort to provide assurance and tangible financial support for the North Korean regime. This approach appears to be motivated in part by perceptions that North Korea requires external support in order to remain viable and that provision of such support can be useful to the promotion of North Korean regime stability. In the case of the United States, implementation of the UNSC Resolution 1874 is designed to push North Korea back to the path of denuclearization, but since the Chinese regard sanctions as narrowly targeted they are not considered as a useful instrument.

While there is no evidence to date that the Obama administration has used sanctions or incentives as a means by which to influence regime stability, there appears to be some conflict between Chinese efforts, which despite unprecedented cooperation in forging a sternly-worded resolution seem to be strongly influenced in implementation of the resolution by concerns about regime stability, and the U.S. objective of bringing North Korea back to the path of denuclearization (not simply back to denuclearization talks). Moving forward, it is possible to imagine that differences between the United States and China over containment versus engagement could be influenced at least in part by differing perceptions of the extent to which external policies might influence factors for internal

stability in North Korea as well as differences over how much instability to risk in the course of pursuing North Korea's denuclearization. To the extent that Chinese policymakers perceive a significant risk of instability in North Korea – either derived from internal sources or the perception that external pressure may result in destabilization – China may take actions that will act as an effective constraint on the ability of the United States to pursue denuclearization based on China's own concerns about prospects for instability.

Conclusion

Kim Jong-il's health crisis has had some effects on the Obama administration's early efforts to formulate a policy toward North Korea, but this paper argues that most of these effects have been secondary to the focus on North Korea's nuclear program as a destabilizing influence on regional security and a source of potential proliferation to other regions. Primarily, Kim's health crisis has been a reminder that he will not live forever. There is a possibility both that leadership succession is not assured and that there will be a resulting discontinuity in North Korea's current policies, which have hardened in ways that appear to significantly reduce the near-term prospects for North Korea's denuclearization. The initial focus on Kim Jong-il's health issues, while perceived as an underlying reason for North Korea's provocations, was obscured by the need to mount a political response to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests at the United Nations.

Despite Kim Jong-il's personal health issues, a dominant framework for U.S. policy making has been the effort to deny North Korea the

possibility of repeating past tactics in dealing with the issue of denuclearization, suggesting that the Obama administration is more worried by continuity in North Korea's diplomatic approach and continued challenge to U.S. denuclearization objectives than by problems that might be created by North Korean instability or a failed leadership succession.

In fact, U.S. concerns about prospects for North Korean instability were eased in part by the fact that the North Koreans themselves appeared to be paying greater attention to the political succession process in the spring of 2009, even if their internal focus was interpreted to mean that the North might be less responsive to international concerns. In addition, the harder, provocative line taken by the North when Kim's health appeared to be uncertain has provided an indirect reminder to the United States that there may be a greater possibility that regime transition will result in a harder-line from the North than that a new North Korean leader will embrace reform. There have even been suggestions that nuclear capability might be manipulated as an internal political factor that reinforces the power and control of Kim and any successor he may choose to designate. (Or, the realization on the part of Kim Jong-il that time is not on his side might provide new opportunities for the United States, although the conventional wisdom is that Kim and/or his designated successors are highly unlikely to give up their nuclear weapons.)

Kim Jong-il's health crisis has had an impact on the urgency with which the Obama administration has pursued contingency planning and has revitalized coordination between U.S. Forces Korea and the incoming Lee Myung-bak administration, which in contrast to the Roh administration has shown a renewed willingness to take up official planning with the United States for the possibility of North Korean instability. Strengthened

U.S.-ROK coordination of policy toward North Korea is a prerequisite for effective contingency planning and is now in place, although there are still questions about whether the United States and South Korea would be in the same place politically in the event of an actual contingency in the North. For this reason, there should be an enhanced effort to promote inter-agency and inter-governmental pre-coordination to the extent possible on a variety of contingency scenarios that the United States and South Korea might face together.²⁰

Another focal point for enhanced planning in response to possible North Korean instability has involved the need to enhance policy discussions and policy coordination on this issue with China. However, the PRC continues to refuse to take up this issue at an official level, instead preferring an informal exchange of views on possible approaches that the respective sides might take in response to North Korean instability. While Chinese interlocutors appear to be increasingly confident about their capacity to manage the humanitarian overflow of North Korean refugees into Chinese territory, they still show great concern about the prospects for and intentions of a U.S.-ROK joint intervention, insisting that approval by the UNSC would be necessary prior to any external intervention into the North. On many tactical issues, Chinese concerns with the potential for instability in North Korea are becoming a source of conflict with approaches preferred by the United States precisely because the Chinese side continues to value North Korean stability as a priority over the objective of denuclearization. This suggests that the near-term

²⁰ - See-Won Byun, "North Korea Contingency Planning and U.S.-ROK Cooperation," Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, September 2009, <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DPRKContingencyCUSKP0908.pdf>.

prospects for achieving North Korea's denuclearization are low, and that the Chinese are committed to promoting regime continuity, even at the expense of allowing North Korea to continue as a de facto nuclear weapons state.

The United States and South Korea should lay out an approach to North Korea's denuclearization that is not centered on a single scenario or dependent on a single individual; rather it is necessary for the United States and South Korea to indicate clearly that denuclearization goes hand-in-hand with the prospect of a normalized political and economic relationship with the United States.

In the long-term context of North Korea's economic and political transition, current U.S. efforts in bilateral and multilateral dialogue, denuclearization and nonproliferation, and containment and engagement can be viewed as mutually reinforcing rather than reflecting conflicting intentions. The United States along with its Asian allies and key regional powers must pursue an approach that combines bolder measures against North Korean provocative behavior with continued dialogue and engagement in support of North Korea's positive transformation and integration with the international community. These efforts should ultimately be coordinated with a common vision for the future of Korea, stemming from which regional stakeholders can respond to various North Korean contingency scenarios through comprehensive and multi-dimensional approaches.

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