

*Rethinking the Six-Party Process on Korea**

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Abstract

As of late 2010 the six-party process regarding North Korean proliferation is moribund if not dead. Moreover, multiple crises generated by provocative North Korean behavior could set in motion a chain of events leading to conflicts if not outright war. Furthermore, it should be clear that the U.S. policy of attempting to pressure China to pressure North Korea to behave in what Washington considers to be a more reasonable manner and negotiate seriously is a futile enterprise. Accordingly this essay examines the reasons for the failure of the six-party talks and does so not only with reference to North Korean behavior, but also with an eye to the larger strategic environment in which the talks occur. Bearing in mind the fundamental transformation of Northeast Asia's strategic landscape the essay then proceeds to suggest a way out of the impasse for the United States in order to regenerate a process that might actually bring North Korea back to a serious negotiation.

Key Words: North Korea, six-party talks, United States, China, Russia

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The six-party process is moribund and failing if not dead.¹ Indeed, Niklas Swanstrom of Sweden's Institute for Development and Policy flatly says the process is dead.² This stagnation preceded the DPRK's announcement of a uranium enrichment plant much more sophisticated than anyone believed and its shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010. It also was visible before the Cheonan incident of March 2010 when North Korea torpedoed a South Korean ship. North Korea is also reportedly preparing a third nuclear test that will likely further delay if not kill the resumption of six-party talks.³ This breakdown, attributable to many causes, has engendered the growing intransigence of the major parties. Absent a major change in their policies no change or relief is in sight. This may make the next crisis much more dangerous as South Korea has now publicly announced that it will retaliate in force against new attacks.⁴ And the advent of this uranium enrichment plant creates opportunities for North Korea to begin building many more nuclear bombs.⁵

Thus there is good reason for mounting concern. North Korea now talks of the situation as being on the brink of war and South Korea has pledged retaliation for any future Northern provocations.⁶ In September

¹- Balbina Hwang and Michael O'Hanlon, "Defense Issues and Asia's Security Architecture," in Michael J. Green and Bates Gill (eds.), *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 281

²- Niklas Swanstrom, "Artillery Exchange on the Korean Peninsula," Institute for Security and Development, *Policy Brief*, No. 44, November 23, 2010, www.isdp.eu.

³- Kim Se-Jeong, "Japanese Media Allege North Korea Preparing Nuke Test," *Korea Times*, November 17, 2010, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/11/113_76532.html.

⁴- "South Korea Vows Retaliation Against Any Further Attack," *Reuters*, November 29, 2010.

⁵- Siegfried S. Hecker, "A Return Trip to North Korea's Yongbyun Nuclear Complex," Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, November 24, 2010, <http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/23035/Yongbyonreport.pdf>.

⁶- "South Korea Vows Retaliation Against Any Further Attack."

2010, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin, Moscow's delegate to the talks, said that the Korean Peninsula was on the brink of war.⁷ Concurrently although the succession of Kim Jong-un has so far progressed without incident, we cannot take the enduring stability of North Korea for granted. Many signs suggest a genuine possibility of internal ferment or revolutionary crisis within North Korea (even apart from a possible succession crisis) that could destabilize it and trigger very grave and unforeseen crises.⁸ For example, succession to Kim Jong-un could easily trigger internal and/or external clashes in and around the DPRK that could easily drag the outside powers into conflict, and North Korean military risk taking is a highly possible contingency.⁹ Defections, corruption, riots when the 2009 currency reform was introduced, jail-breaks, the breaking of the regime's information monopoly, a precarious food situation, etc. all signify a potential for eruption if there is a break in leadership or elite cohesion. Alternatively elites who lose out may defect or seek to overturn that result. All this occurs in the context of the apparent ascendancy of North Korean hard-liners and the military, which undermines prospects for a more accommodating foreign policy even if Pyongyang returns to the six-party talks. Meanwhile, the U.S. and ROK

7- Andrew Osborn, "North and South Korea on the Brink of War, Russian Diplomat Warns," *Telgraph.co.uk*, September 24, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8020972/North-and-South-Korea-on-the-brink-of-war-Russian-diplomat-warns.html>.

8- "Not Waiving, Perhaps Drowning," *The Economist: Briefing: North Korea*, May 29, 2010, pp. 23-25; Rudiger Frank, "Currency Reform and Orthodox Socialism in North Korea," Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network (NAPSNET), *Policy Forum Online*, December 3, 2009; "N. Korea Backtracks as Currency Reform Spells Riots," *Chosun Ilbo* (English edition), December 15, 2009, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/12/15/2009121400361.html; Captain Jonathan Stafford, USA, "Finding America's Role in a Collapsed North Korean State," *Military Review*, January/February 2008, p. 98; "N. Korea's Currency Reform: A Bid to Cement Power," *Chosun Ilbo* (English edition), December 2, 2009, http://english.chosun.com/site/daa/html_dir/2009/12/02/20091202200656.html.

9- "CIA Chief Panetta Says North Korea's Kim Preparing Succession," Sanger and Shanker.

have already confidentially discussed unification scenarios.¹⁰

Second, foreign discussions concerning Pyongyang's motives for precipitating the crises of 2010 usually divide into the following explanations. Analyses focusing on domestic determinants of the DPRK's actions claim that the regime needs the military's support for Kim Jong-un in the succession by conducting aggressive moves against the U.S. and South Korea and demonstrating, e.g. through the enrichment facility, that North Korea will never renounce nuclear weapons.¹¹ That denouement, in turn, vitiates prospects for resuming the six-party talks because from Washington's, if not Tokyo's and Seoul's viewpoints, this North Korean stance means there is nothing to talk about.

Assessments emphasizing foreign policy drivers claim that North Korea is employing its habitual tactics to force the U.S. to take it seriously and engage it in bilateral negotiations and possibly also is simultaneously trying to induce South Korea to restore elements of the Sunshine Policy and economic transfers to the North.¹² North Korea also continues to conduct a highly risk-acceptant policy seen in the crises of 2010 and its transfer of missiles and proliferation capabilities abroad. Indeed, by 2007 North Korea had established itself as "the Third World's greatest supplier of missiles, missile components and related technologies."¹³

This risk-acceptant behavior appears to derive from the belief that Moscow and Beijing will ultimately restrain Washington from imposing truly serious punishments upon North Korea, while the U.S. cannot or

¹⁰- "South Korea Vows Retaliation Against Any Further Attack."

¹¹- E. G. Sue Fleming, "Gates Says Kim Jong-il's Son Seeks Military 'Stripes,'" Reuters.com, August 13, 2010.

¹²- Sangsoo Lee and Christopher O'Hara, "Yeonpyeong on Fire and Enriched Uranium," Institute for Security and Development, *Policy Brief*, No. 45, November 26, 2010, www.isdp.eu.

¹³- Daniel A. Pinkston, *The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2008), p. 57

will not use its full power to strike back at it for these risky moves. Neither will Russia or China then be able to exercise any restraining leverage upon North Korea. Therefore North Korea can behave provocatively at what appears to be a minimum or at least manageable risk. While this behavior has allowed North Korea to get nuclear weapons without paying what it considers to be an unbearable price, it also exposes its supposed “backers” to the consequences of these great risks taken in disregard of their interests and without their knowledge or acceptance of the risks.¹⁴ But since Russian and Chinese behavior has allowed North Korea to keep behaving provocatively North Korea has repeatedly outmaneuvered the other five members of the process to the point where U.S. officials now publicly charge that China’s refusal to exercise decisive pressure upon the DPRK means that China has become North Korea’s enabler.¹⁵ Yet nothing seems likely to alter Pyongyang’s calculation of the costs it incurs by acting this way. Indeed, at least some Russian experts believe that nobody can scare North Korea with sanctions.¹⁶ Clearly this kind of behavior could easily ignite the conflagration that Moscow, if not other capitals, most fear.

The fact that the military seemingly is the strongest faction in North Korean politics and must be appeased by provocative international behavior to cement the succession or even may to some degree be acting on its own also raises many threats to regional security.¹⁷ This may be especially true since Pyongyang has long acted on the belief that the only way to get Washington’s or Seoul’s attention is to create a major crisis and

¹⁴ - Yongho Kim and Myungchul Kim, “North Korea’s Risk-Taking vis-à-vis the U.S. Coercion,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, XIX, No. 44, Winter 2007, pp. 81-82.

¹⁵ - “North Korea, China in “Consensus” on Crisis,” *Global Security Newswire*, December 9, 2010, www.nti.org.

¹⁶ - Moscow, *Ekho Moskvyy News Agency* (in Russian), May 20, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, May 20, 2010.

¹⁷ - Sangsoo Lee and Christopher O’Hara.

may believe it can take risks with impunity. Yet current U.S., South Korean, and probably Japanese domestic politics preclude any generosity to North Korea or quick return to the six-party talks absent guarantees of denuclearization and an end to provocations which are driven by North Korea's domestic politics. Consequently the intersection of the main players' domestic politics and regional threat perceptions combine to frustrate anything but a deepening cycle of provocations and resistance. Meanwhile apparently nobody can or is willing to control North Korea's behavior.¹⁸

Likewise, there is no reason to believe that imposing new sanctions will stop Pyongyang's risk-acceptant and provocative behavior. The revenues it gains from proliferation are vital to its economic survival. Second, China will not bring to bear its full weight to truly implement the existing UN imposed sanctions. So, new sanctions cannot achieve much.¹⁹ More sanctions, even if passed by the UN, can only obstruct a return to the six-party process; and this is not only because we cannot really count on their full implementation. Since North Korea demands an end to sanctions barring its arms trade as a precondition of returning to the talks, any new sanctions probably only strengthen its resolve not to rejoin the process.

Michael O'Hanlon has identified a series of other dangers that could easily grow out of the current situation. These are the dangers of proliferation either to terrorists or other states. Should the DPRK collapse control over nuclear materials could easily deteriorate enabling possessors of those materials to sell them abroad to the highest bidder. On the other hand should North Korea persist as a nuclear power its capabilities could

¹⁸- Stephen Blank, "Russia and the Six-Party Process in Korea," Paper presented to the annual conference of the Korea Economic Institute of America, October 22, 2010.

¹⁹- Andrei Lankov, "The North Korean Issue: What Can Be Done?" in Nicole Finnemann and Korea Economic Institute (eds.), *Navigating Turbulence in Northeast Asia: The Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, Washington, D.C., 2010, pp. 80-85.

either weaken deterrence among the members of the U.S. Asian alliance system, or even start a war entailing missile strikes on South Korea, Japan, or even possibly the United States. Lastly, a nuclear North Korea could engender a “nuclear domino effect” leading Japan, South Korea, and possibly other states to contemplate going nuclear or actually do so.²⁰

Causes for the Breakdown of the Six-Party Process

The primary causes for the present situation reside first in the fundamental incompatibility of the DPRK and U.S. positions; second, in the six-party mechanism’s inherent problems; third, in the evolving disparities in the parties’ positions; and fourth in the greatly transformed Asian strategic environment since the talks began. While North Korea claims it is prepared to return to the talks, it also states that it will not give up its nuclear weapons under any conditions.²¹ This suggests that Washington’s demand for an irrevocable prior commitment to complete, verifiable, and irreversible disarmament (CVID) of its nuclear weapons is a non-starter. The Russian Korea expert, Georgy Toloraya, openly argued that if the talks are about denuclearization first and other issues subsequently they will be futile as North Korea will simply refuse to play a serious part.²² He also claims that North Korea sees no purpose to the six-party talks as it gained little from them and did not get substantial security guarantees or real economic assistance.²³

²⁰-O’Hanlon, p. 281.

²¹-Ralph A. Cossa, “The Sino-U.S. Relationship: Respecting Each Other’s Core Interests.” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, XXXII, No. 5, 2010, pp. 272-273.

²²-Georgy Toloraya, “Russia and the North Korean Knot,” www.japanfocus.org/georgy-toloraya-3345, 2010.

²³-Georgy Toloraya, “The New Korean Cold War and the Possibility of Thaw,” www.japanfocus.org/georgy-toloraya-3258.

Thus Pyongyang has announced that its agenda for resuming negotiations focuses on the following set of goals:

- Gaining recognition as a de facto nuclear weapon state or, failing that, preventing efforts to disarm its nuclear weapons;
- Convincing Washington and others that they have no choice but to normalize relations with North Korea as a nuclear state;
- Maximizing all available material benefits through negotiations while conceding nothing on its nuclear program;
- Convincing the international community and UNSC to lift existing sanctions and impose no new ones;
- Shifting discussion of the six-party talks from denuclearization to a “peace regime” based on ending or attenuating U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea.²⁴

Consequently its conditions for rejoining the process completely contradict the U.S. position that demands an advance commitment to the CVID package and shows no interest in a preceding peace settlement. Thus at best an impasse appears to be the foreseeable future of the six-party process even if it somehow resumed soon.

This impasse alone suffices to torpedo any early resumption of the six-party process. But in the context of the added crises of 2010, the domestic constraints on key actors in the wake of U.S. elections, the collapse of the Sunshine Policy, and North Korea’s succession it is difficult to see the point of resuming them let alone how this resumption might come about. But this impasse could generate renewed crises, especially as North Korea thinks it must provoke new crises to be heard. While the six-party process has hitherto functioned largely as a mechanism for

²⁴-Evans J. R. Revere, “The North Korea Nuclear Problem: Sailing into Uncharted Waters,” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, No. 32, 2010, pp. 183-184.

crisis management, it is neither working nor managing crises, and it could break down. This is not surprising since the process has contained within it the seeds of such an outcome from its inception.

A second cause for the failure of the talks lies in the inherent difficulties in arranging any multilateral consensus, let alone a unity of views and actions on an issue affecting the parties' vital national interests.²⁵ Since all activity occurs within an environment of multiple triangular and bilateral relationships among the participants, mutual coordination is inherently very difficult.²⁶ Furthermore the record of multilateral security institutions in Asia is not encouraging. Multilateral Asian security institutions have poorly adapted their original function to changing power realities, notably rising powers' demands, while the six-party process is not yet an accepted multilateral security organization rather than a crisis management and thus somewhat ad hoc organization.²⁷ Indeed, the six parties' competitive approaches to Northeast Asian security, particularly in the now dynamic evolution of this region with a rising China, a seemingly declining America and a threatening North Korea, underscore the difficulty in using the six-party process to generate multilateral harmony.²⁸

²⁵- John Gerard Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²⁶- Gilbert Rozman, "U.S. Strategic Thinking on the Japanese-South Korean Historical Dispute," in Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *U.S. Leadership, History, and Bilateral Relations in Northeast Asia* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 151.

²⁷- Michael Wesley, "Asia-Pacific Institutions," in William T. Tow (ed.), *Security Relations in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global Nexus?* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 49-66.

²⁸- Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia's Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States (Strategic Thought in Northeast Asia)* (2nd ed.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Michael J. Green and Bates Gill (eds.), *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community* (New York: Columbia

Third, there is an added problem of different conceptions of what the six-party process should achieve. China is retreating from the idea that it should aim to denuclearize North Korea. Instead China argues it should serve as a means to reduce tensions. When Kim Jong-il visited China in August 2010, he and the Chinese press both stressed that this was the process' purpose, not to arrange for denuclearization or a peace treaty for the Korean War.²⁹ If this concept of the talks is allowed to prevail North Korea will become a nuclear state *de facto* and possibly *de jure*, while remaining in many ways an outlaw state and thus an obstacle to regional security because the U.S., ROK, and Japan will not accept it as a nuclear state. Nor will they accept upending the six-party talks to serve an agenda that only benefits Beijing and Pyongyang at their expense.

Even if Russia and China correctly argue that denuclearization can only ensue from a long-term process of confidence-building and mutual security guarantees, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo are unwilling to hear this argument. Japan even publicly stated its belief that this is not an auspicious time to reconvene the talks. South Korea and Washington agree with this and demand an apology for the shelling of Yeonpyeong while Washington insists on a prior commitment to denuclearization as a precondition for resuming the six-party talks.³⁰

The Changed Strategic Environment

Finally the strategic environment within which the talks originated has completely changed. Any new talks must take the new environment

University Press, 2009).

²⁹ - "DPRK Top Leader Kim Jong-il Hopes for Early Resumption of Six-Party Talks," *Xinhua* (in Chinese), August 30, 2010, Open Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, China (Henceforth *FBIS CHI*), August 30, 2010.

³⁰ - "U.S., allies remain opposed to nuclear talks with North Korea."

into account and synchronize their activities with those major trends. Asia's strategic transformation necessarily entails reconfiguring the participants' ambitions and interests regarding the six-party process. But this change too makes it harder to visualize the process as successfully denuclearizing and reintegrating North Korea within a new regional order.

First, the talks are about more than denuclearizing North Korea. Indeed, they should facilitate the creation of a new, durable, and legitimate order in Northeast Asia wherein North Korea can make peace with its interlocutors and assume its rightful place. Ultimately if not immediately, this means formal resolution of the Korean War and mutual recognition by all the parties. Otherwise neither South nor North Korea would obtain security and denuclearization would be a sham. And those would be only the most immediate consequences of a failed resolution.

Second, while the possibility of the DPRK's collapse is real and Washington must constantly conduct coordinated contingency planning with Tokyo and Seoul if not the other members of the process, it must also act as if the DPRK will endure and be an independent, secure, denuclearized, and viable state. Otherwise no lasting or workable solution can be created nor can the U.S. then formulate a strategy rather than tactics, or gain leverage over North Korea. Third, we must grasp that North Korea's nuclearization aims to free itself not only from U.S. and ROK threats, but also from Chinese domination. For example, North Korea has consciously refused to follow China's course and reform its economy along Chinese lines. Indeed, there are compelling arguments suggesting that the DPRK has decided that reform along Chinese lines is too dangerous to its continued tenure and will not be launched.³¹ Other analysts like Alexander Mansourov suggest that it may actually be

³¹-Lankov, pp. 80-85.

dynamically stable.³² There may well be debates in Pyongyang about choosing to emulate either China or Vietnam's reform trajectory, but even emulating China will not occur by kowtowing to it.³³

Even if China is North Korea's main interlocutor there is much well-founded North Korean suspicion of Chinese aims and tensions. Beijing's clear hostility to the DPRK's free economic zone in Sinuiju launched in 2002 and anger about not being consulted suggest a lurking interest in converting North Korea into an economic satellite of China, hardly Seoul's or Pyongyang's objective.³⁴ Since then Chinese economic penetration of North Korea has greatly expanded.³⁵ Meanwhile defectors from the North confirm its elite's antipathy to rising Chinese power even as the DPRK's dependence upon Chinese aid grows.³⁶ Given the not so hidden tension and mutual dislike that pervades Sino-DPRK relations, North Korea will not easily increase that dependence which clearly grates upon it. But the problem of DPRK-China relations is greater than that. Despite talk of the two states' closeness being like lips and teeth, there is no fraternal sentimentality between them.³⁷ Subsequent analyses suggest

³²-Alexandre Y. Mansourov, "Disaster Management and Institutional Change in the DPRK: Trends in the Songun Era," in James M. Lister and Korea Economic Institute (eds.), *On Korea*, Washington, D.C., 2007, pp. 67-68.

³³-Peter Lee, "Dear Leader's Designs on Uncle Sam," *Asia Times Online*, December 3, 2010, www.atimes.com.

³⁴-Liu Ming, "China's Role in the Course of North Korea's Transition," in Ahn Choong-yong, Nicholas Eberstadt, and Lee Young-sun (eds.), *A New International Engagement Framework for North Korea?: Contending Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2004), pp. 338-339.

³⁵-Jaeho Hwang, "Measuring China's Influence Over North Korea," *Issues & Studies*, XLVII, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 208-210.

³⁶-Selig Harrison, "North Korea From the Inside Out," *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1998, p. C1, quoted in Samuel S. Kim, "The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform," in David M. Lampton (ed.), *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978-2000* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 403.

³⁷-Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in Arms to Allies at Arm's Length* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004); Patrick

the validity of this approach.³⁸ Thus one of many clear motives for North Korea's nuclear quest is to emancipate itself from China's ability or desire to restrain North Korea from pursuing what it believes are its legitimate national interests. Attaining a nuclear capability always entails the nuclear power's freedom to conduct its defense policy as it sees fit. North Korea's desire to free itself from both U.S. and Chinese constraints confirms this pattern.

Recent reports that some officials within the PRC believe North Korea is already or soon will be in a state of collapse and perhaps should be reunited with the South can only aggravate North Korean elites' inherent suspicions of China notwithstanding protestations of unity and support for China and China's current policy of upholding North Korea's stability at virtually all costs.³⁹ The assertions of factional rivalries in North Korea between adherents of a Chinese or Vietnamese model of reform also suggest that not every North Korean official appreciates Chinese lectures on the viability of its reform and development model despite the evident need to stay on China's good side.⁴⁰ Moreover, China's growing economic presence in North Korea may not sit well with more nationalist-minded elites who may espouse reform to regain real economic sovereignty, especially if they prefer a Vietnamese or non-Chinese approach to reform.⁴¹ Therefore we should not presume in advance that North Korea should or will become a Chinese "satellite." Indeed, preventing that is an important, if not vital, U.S., Japanese, and South Korean interest.

M. Morgan, "U.S. Extended Deterrence in East Asia," in Tong Whan Park (ed.), *The U.S. and the Two Koreas: A New Triangle* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), p. 55.

³⁸ -Liu Ming, p. 336.

³⁹ -"Leaked Memos Envision North Korea Collapse," www.cbsnes.com/stories/2010/11/30/world/main710195, November 30, 2010.

⁴⁰ -Peter Lee.

⁴¹ -*Ibid.*

Neither should the U.S. accept this presumption of North Korea's satellization as a policy guideline given the visible Sino-American rivalry in regard to Asia's future organization. Consequently pressuring China to carry the U.S. message to North Korea may not only be misguided but actually counterproductive.

Therefore we must recognize that North Korea's nuclearization represents both a serious challenge and an opportunity to rebalance Northeast Asia in a more secure fashion if we but take the initiative ourselves rather than farming it out to others or simply refusing to deal with Pyongyang. Consequently in devising a strategy for the six-party process' future we must first reckon with the transformation of the Northeast Asian state system which comprises the following developments:

- The clear decline of U.S. power to the point where the U.S. explicitly talks not of unilateralism but of multilateral coalitions even if it still seeks hegemony and an essentially instrumental approach designed to preserve that hegemony over those coalitions⁴²;
- China's rise to the point where it now openly challenges the U.S. and Japan throughout Southeast and Northeast Asia and sees the U.S. as its main rival if not enemy;
- North Korea's continuing nuclearization has reached the point of rumors of an impending third nuclear weapon test.⁴³ Enrichment capability only facilitates this development as it offers oppor-

⁴²-Wesley, pp. 49-66; Michael Mastanduno, "The United States: Regional Interests and Global Opportunities," in William T. Tow (ed.), *Security Relations in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global Nexus?* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 83-84.

⁴³-Kim Se-Jong, "Japanese Media Allege North Korea Preparing Nuke Test," *Korea Times*, November 17, 2010.

- tunities for making more bombs using plutonium;
- Japan's continuing failure to formulate a strategic approach to Northeast Asia to deal with all the changes occurring there⁴⁴;
 - Russia's continuing failure to regenerate its economy and become a true Asian power that has forced it to attach its development plan for the Russian Far East to China's developmental plans for Heilongjiang.⁴⁵ Certainly Russia lacks leverage on North Korea or the other players and indeed one diplomat characterized its role as being "more nuisance than value"⁴⁶;
 - South Korea's reprioritization of its alliance relationships with Washington and Tokyo, newly proclaimed threats of retaliation, and diminishing willingness to provide large-scale economic transfers to North Korea that has undermined the previous Sunshine Policy;
 - Despite the ROK's growing reluctance to invest in the North, we now see a vibrant competition among South Korea, China, the U.S., and to a lesser degree Japan and Russia to develop the means to influence the future economic and thus political development of North Korea. Thus China is North Korea's biggest foreign economic partner.⁴⁷ Russia, China, and South Korea, all of whom already have a sustained relationship with the DPRK,

⁴⁴ -Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States (Strategic Thought in Northeast Asia)*, pp. 145-191.

⁴⁵ -Stephen Blank, "Towards a New Chinese Order in Asia: Russia's Failure," Forthcoming from the National Bureau of Research, Asia, Seattle, Washington, 2011.

⁴⁶ -Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 240; Sico van der Meer, "Russia: Many Goals Little Activity," in Koen De Cuester and Jan Melissen (eds.), *Ending the North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Six Parties, Six Perspectives* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2008), pp. 86-87.

⁴⁷ -Jayshree Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship," *Council on Foreign Relations*, www.cfr.org, October 7, 2010.

and have long argued for security guarantees to it, have substantially increased their economic-political ties to North Korea, and compete to offer it energy alternatives to its nuclear program.⁴⁸ That rivalry can be seen as just another chapter in the unending efforts of major Asian powers and now the ROK to develop a durable relationship with North Korea to influence its direction and policies.⁴⁹ Each of these governments understands, in its own way, that engaging Pyongyang at least through economic and often indirect means is essential to the pursuit of its larger interests in the region.⁵⁰ Possibly Washington has also seen the necessity of this approach. Indeed, economic penetration may currently be the only possible way of gaining influence on North Korea, for nuclearization makes it more difficult for foreign states to influence its foreign and defense policies by means other than sustained economic and political engagement. But that is an inherently long-term process and China's efforts to use its economic power to leverage trends in both Koreas have not proven particularly effective.⁵¹

⁴⁸-Samuel S. Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Samuel S. Kim, *Demystifying North Korea: North Korean Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War World* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007); Vasily Mikheyev, "Russian Strategic Thinking toward North and South Korea" and Gilbert Rozman, "Russian Strategic Thinking on Asian Regionalism," in Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo and Joseph P. Ferguson (eds.), *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 187-204, and 229-251 respectively.

⁴⁹-*Ibidem*; For historical and contemporary examples see Charles S. Armstrong, Gilbert Rozman, Samuel S. Kim and Stephen Kotkin (eds.), *Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2006).

⁵⁰-*Ibid*; Kim, *ops cit.*; Mikheyev, pp. 187-204; Rozman, "Russian Strategic Thinking on Asian Regionalism," pp. 235-251.

⁵¹-Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009).

Rethinking China's Role

The belief that China will rescue an incoherent American policy and pressure North Korea on Washington's behalf has proven to be utterly misguided and unfounded despite China's mounting exasperation with North Korea.⁵² Yet U.S. officials still insist that pressuring China to pressure North Korea will somehow make Pyongyang more tractable and that Beijing will agree to carry the U.S.' water for it despite its mounting rivalry with the U.S. This author noted the dubiety of this policy already in 2006 and nothing since then has made it more effective.⁵³ Then the argument that Washington cannot produce sufficient pressure on Pyongyang to do supposedly what is in its best interest only drove South Korea closer to Beijing, since the refusal to engage the DPRK reduced the political dividends it would like to have received from the alliance with America. But if the U.S. alliance continues to fail to give South Korea what it most wants, it may wander away from it in the future. Second, this argument that we cannot deal with North Korea but must pressure China to act "responsibly" only fosters greatly enhanced Chinese leverage upon American policy, and not just regarding Korea.⁵⁴ Yet the Obama Administration and its supporters still invoke this argument in the wake of the North Korean tests and subsequent provocations, even though it failed to achieve lasting results under the Bush Administration, and China may be angling to exploit it for its benefit even as it registers its

⁵²- Antoaneta Bezlova, "North Korean Nukes have Their Uses for China," *Asia Times Online*, October 10, 2006, www.atimes.com; Blank, pp. 23-33.

⁵³- Stephen Blank, "The End of the Six-Party Talks?" *Strategic Insights*, January 2007, www.nps.navy.mil; Stephen Blank, "Outsourcing Korea," *Pacific Focus*, XXXI, No. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 7-57. The argument below is based on these two articles.

⁵⁴- Christoph Bluth, "Between a Rock and an Incomprehensible Place: The United States and the Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, XVII, No. 2, Fall 2005, pp. 107-108.

own exasperation with North Korea. Worse, the increasingly visible danger in doing so is that any American position surrendered to China becomes irretrievable.⁵⁵ As Graham Allison wrote, America's failure or defeat is China's opportunity.⁵⁶

China has never been willing nor able to move North Korea as far as Washington wants. Indeed, China is the main reason sanctions have neither worked in the past nor will work in the future.⁵⁷ It prizes North Korea's stability over Washington's demands and while it opposes North Korean nuclearization it will not support policies that represent an attempt to impose regime change on North Korea or that might destabilize it.⁵⁸ Indeed, it values North Korea as a reason for tying down thousands of U.S. military forces that might otherwise be assigned to Taiwan.⁵⁹ A crisis over North Korea might possibly also upset China's domestic leadership balance. China will neither sacrifice North Korea to America nor insist on its total denuclearization despite Pyongyang's exasperation of China. China apparently decided by 2010 if not earlier that despite North Korean provocations its best interests are served by

⁵⁵ Jaeho Hwang, "Measuring China's Influence over North Korea," *Issues & Studies*, XLVII, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 205-232 is only the most recent full exploration of this Sino-DPRK relationship and the question of China's influence over the DPRK but it reflects a scholarly consensus on the dubiety of expecting that China will push North Korea to the wall. See also Christopher P. Twomey, "China Policy toward North Korea and its Implications for the United States: Balancing Competing Concerns," *Strategic Insights*, V, No. 7, September 2006.

⁵⁶ Graham Allison, "North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Bush Administration Failure; China's Opportunity," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, XVIII, No. 3, Fall 2006, pp. 7-34.

⁵⁷ Andrei Lankov, "North Korean Blackmail," *International Herald Tribune*, November 25, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/25/opinion/25iht-edlankov.html?_r=1.

⁵⁸ This is the overwhelming consensus of expert opinion in the vast literature on China's policies to date. For recent examples see Hun Bong Park, "China's Position on Unification and U.S. Forces Korea," *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, XXIV, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2010, pp. 124-149.

⁵⁹ Shen Dingli, "PRC Scholar Analyzes Implications of a DPRK Nuclear Test," NAPSNET, October 3, 2006.

preserving the regime's stability, not unifying it or acceding to U.S. pressure.⁶⁰ Indeed, China's most recent posture displays its interest in using the Korean issue to ratify its rise in Asia at U.S. expense and to rearrange Asia's security order, thus tying Korean issues to the larger regional canvas.⁶¹ China also advocates security guarantees for North Korea, and has been consistently skeptical of U.S. initiatives and claims, often blaming Washington for failures to make progress.⁶²

Thus this approach greatly misreads China's objectives in regard to North Korea. Xiaoxiong Yi wrote even before the September 19-20, 2005 agreement that,

China has no intention to "help" the U.S. What Beijing wants is to draw a comprehensive "Korean Peninsula road map" and to play a prominent role in Northeast Asia. For Beijing, the building blocks with which it can assemble a road map are the following. The first is to press Washington and Pyongyang to agree on "face-saving" language that would provide a framework for future negotiations. Then what China wants is a U.S. nonaggression assurance provided for North Korea, co-sponsored by China. The third is a Chinese and Russian informal or formal security guarantee for North Korea, and fourth, new South Korean and Japanese economic aid for North Korea. The goals of a Beijing "road map" would be, in effect, twofold: first, to facilitate the transformation of North Korea into a large economic development zone for China's economic devel-

⁶⁰-Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States (Strategic Thought in Northeast Asia)*, pp. 237-261; Aidan Foster-Carter, "China Help With North Korea? Fuggedaboutit!" www.foreignpolicy.com, November 26, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/26/china_help_with_north_korea_fuggedaboutit.

⁶¹-Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States (Strategic Thought in Northeast Asia)*, pp. 237-261.

⁶²-Joseph Kahn and Susan Chira, "China Challenges U.S. on Pyongyang's Arms," *International Herald Tribune*, June 10, 2004, p. 1; "China Omits Uranium Enrichment Row in Draft Report," *Kyodo News Service*, June 23, 2004, retrieved from Lexis-Nexis; Mike Nartker, "Bush, Koizumi Discuss North Korean Nuclear Program," *Global Security Newswire*, August 9, 2004, [ww.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2004_6_9.html](http://www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2004_6_9.html).

opment and a stable buffer state for China's national security, rather than an assembly line for weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, and second, to reduce the American influence in South Korea and to create a strategically neutralized Korean Peninsula. From China's point of view, whether or not the six nations can agree on how to stop Pyongyang's nuclear program, the talks have produced at least one breakthrough: the emergence of China as a more confident power broker in the region.⁶³

Similarly Bon-Hak Koo wrote that,

China seems to prefer to maximize its strategic interests in the process of nuclear negotiations rather than pursuing a complete resolution of the North's nuclear issue. China intends to use the North Korean card against a strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese security cooperation in the North-east Asian region. China's major concern is not to change the North Korean regime, but to manage North Korea and maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁴

Equally frustrating to Washington, if not Seoul, is the fact that China evidently has less leverage or will not deploy whatever leverage it does possess while Washington continues to insist that it does.⁶⁵ As one former Chinese official says, America's approach is characteristically legalistic whereas China's strategy is not to lecture the North Koreans on their obligations but rather to reassure them about their security.⁶⁶ China regards calls from senior U.S. policymakers as an attempt to pressure it to abandon a buffer state and ally to Washington's unipolar demands as a pretext for starting a crisis that could lead to war.⁶⁷ This was true in 2006

⁶³ - Xiaoxiong Yi, "Chinese Foreign Policy In Transition: Understanding China's "Peaceful Development."” *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, XIX, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2005, pp. 89-90.

⁶⁴ - Bon-Hak Koo, "The Six-Party Talks: A Critical Assessment and Implications for South Korea's Policy toward North Korea," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, XVIII, No. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 98-99.

⁶⁵ - Bezlova, Bluth, pp. 97-99.

⁶⁶ - Michael Wines and David E. Sanger, "Delay in Korea Talks Is Sign of U.S.-Chinese Tension," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2010, www.nytimes.com.

⁶⁷ - Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in Arms to Allies at Arm's Length*

and still remains true today under considerably altered circumstances. Naturally either outcome is unacceptable to China. And today it can enforce its view or so it believes because the U.S. position has weakened due to the global economic crisis while China's position has improved dramatically.

Therefore China feels it can challenge the U.S. in Asia as part of its broader global policy. Its recent policies not to denounce North Korean provocations exemplifies this trend.⁶⁸ Moreover U.S. officials believe that China's policy allows North Korea to behave provocatively in the belief that "China has its back." In their view China's "willful blindness" toward North Korea enables North Korea's provocations. Furthermore, China apparently has turned a blind eye toward North Korean efforts to export weapons technology for hard currency and may have allowed North Korean sales of long-range missiles or missile parts to transit to Iran via Beijing airport.⁶⁹ And when China made its most recent proposal to resume the six-party talks with no prior conditions, it did so in the context of attacking the U.S. for sending carriers to join with Japan and South Korea in exercises in the Yellow Sea which it claims constitute part of its exclusive economic zone.⁷⁰ So while the fear that U.S. policy might lead either to war or a collapse of the DPRK galvanized China to seize the diplomatic initiative in unprecedented ways since 2003 that have clearly strengthened its overall position in Asia, more recently it would appear that Chinese arrogance toward the U.S. and its allies

(Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004), p. 14.

⁶⁸ - Wines and Sanger; Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States (Strategic Thought in Northeast Asia)*.

⁶⁹ - Wines and Sanger; John Pomfret, "U.S. Steps Up Pressure on China to Rein in N. Korea," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2010, p. 1; Trudy Rubin, "China Runs Big Risks Coddling N. Korea," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 5, 2010.

⁷⁰ - Ian Johnson and Martin Fackler, "China Addresses Rising Korean Tensions, But with a Warning to the U.S.," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2010, www.nytimes.com.

manifests itself not only in manufactured crises with Japan but also in signs of a lack of seriousness toward the dangers of proliferation and the six-party talks.⁷¹

Meanwhile North Korea has often resisted China, continues to do so, and there are definite signs of a process of mutual estrangement.⁷² The fact of North Korea giving China 20 minutes notice of its 2006 test suggests Pyongyang's distrust of Beijing's motives.⁷³ Indeed, Pyongyang's anger with Beijing and sense of betrayal may have contributed to the decision to launch the test.⁷⁴ And China may have considered revising its nonaggression treaty with the DPRK in 2003-06 as it has dropped several hints over the past decade that the treaty no longer means what its original intent and language clearly state, i.e. a close alliance with North Korea.⁷⁵ Indeed, Jasper Becker claims that China made contingency plans for a possible invasion of North Korea in 2003 when it worried about an American strike against the DPRK's nuclear facilities to instill a pro-Chinese regime that would forsake nuclearization. But he reported that China's military chiefs said this could not be done.⁷⁶ This estrangement still obstructs Chinese efforts to influence Pyongyang to shun nuclear weapons but is unlikely to produce a total rupture between it and Beijing. Still, this disregard for China's advice publicly exposes the limits of

⁷¹ - Pomfret; Rubin.

⁷² - Melinda Liu, "China's Dilemma," *Newsweek* and MSNBC.com, October 9, 2006, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15182514/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098/; Ian Johnson and Michael Wines, "North Korea Relies on China But Tends to Resist its Guidance," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2010, www.nytimes.com.

⁷³ - As seen by the author on CNN Television Network, October 9, 2006.

⁷⁴ - Melinda Liu, "China's Dilemma," *Newsweek* and MSNBC.com, October 9, 2006, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15182514/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098/

⁷⁵ - Jae Ho Chung, "China's Ascendancy and the Korean Peninsula: From Interest Re-evaluation to Strategic Realignment?" in David Shambaugh (ed.), *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), p. 154.

⁷⁶ - "The Nightmare Comes to Pass," *The Economist*, October 14, 2006, p. 25.

China's supposed leverage upon North Korea, surely not Beijing's objective. So from China's standpoint it is arguably unlikely to make too many further demands upon Pyongyang lest it be rebuffed again and its weakness exposed or the U.S. position improved. Despite North Korea's obduracy, U.S. pressure upon Beijing incurs Chinese resistance and skepticism while fortifying North Korea's refusal to listen to Beijing. Finally North Korea also resists China because doing so obliges Beijing to pay it more blackmail in the form of economic and food aid just to have it come to the talks and/or to survive.⁷⁷

Accordingly China cannot be happy with Washington for putting it in what could be a no-win and even major crisis situation. Neither is it pleased with North Korea for constantly blackmailing it and spurning its advice as noted above. Indeed, in response to North Korea's missile tests of 2006 China undertook several initiatives to show Pyongyang its displeasure.⁷⁸ These episodes lent force to the signs of a mutual estrangement between the two governments but hardly suggest that China will soon adopt the U.S. position or tactics. Although North Korea's non-nuclearization is a vital priority for China, preserving peace and stability on the peninsula outranks it. Indeed, China probably has a greater stake in preserving North Korea's stability than does any other player in the talks. China's stake in North Korean survival is demographic (refugees being a major fear), economic, and strategic. China will surely make

⁷⁷- Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in Arms to Allies at Arm's Length*, pp. 3-5. See also the remarks of Quan Jing at "A Regional Discussion of the Six-Party Process: Challenges and Opportunities in North Korea," Transcript of a meeting at the Brookings Institution, March 11, 2005, www.brookings.edu; Liu Ming, "China's Role in the Course of North Korea's Transition," Ahn Choong-yong, Nicholas Eberstadt, and Lee Young-sun (eds.), *A New International Engagement Framework for North Korea?: Contending Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2004), pp. 338-339.

⁷⁸- Stephen Blank, "China's Displeasure with North Korea's Missile Tests," *China Brief*, VI, No. 19, September 20, 2006, pp. 9-10.

maximum efforts to prevent a war or pressure aiming toward a collapse of North Korea over preventing its nuclearization.⁷⁹

China also resists U.S. pressures because they ultimately conflict with its most vital interests of preserving peace around its frontiers and retaining influence over North Korean developments. Should Beijing pressure Pyongyang to accede to American demands when the thrust of the DPRK's foreign policy is to compel Washington to engage it seriously and bilaterally, China will paradoxically have then reduced whatever leverage it might have over North Korea. It might seem bizarre but Chinese elites view this leverage as something that must be used sparingly lest it diminish. Certainly it should not be used primarily to advance American interests.⁸⁰ This will remain a determining factor in Chinese policy even though Chinese analysts and officials know all too well that the DPRK's nuclear gambit aims to free itself from Chinese pressure on its security affairs while maximizing its ability to extort aid from all the other parties. Consequently there is no rational basis for thinking that China will undermine its own security interests to please Washington who demands what Chinese officials perceive as North Korea's unilateral surrender.⁸¹ China's grasp of the American position also explains why it argues that North Korea's denuclearization must be coupled with security guarantees, economic assistance, and the right to a peaceful nuclear program under the NPT.

Meanwhile in Beijing and elsewhere U.S. recalcitrance about direct

⁷⁹ - Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in Arms to Allies at Arm's Length*.

⁸⁰ - *Ibid.*, pp. 13-26. See also the remarks of Quan Jing at "A Regional Discussion of the Six-Party Process: Challenges and Opportunities in North Korea," Transcript of a meeting at the Brookings Institution, March 11, 2005, www.brookings.edu.

⁸¹ - "U.S.-North Korea Relations Worry China and South Korea," *SABC News*, May 6, 2005, www.sabcnews.com/world/asia/pacific/02172103705.00.html; "ROK Chief Negotiator; China's Role Outstanding," *Xinhua*, September 19, 2005; Michael Hirsh and Melinda Liu, "North Korea Hold'em," *Newsweek*, October 3, 2005, pp. 42-43.

talks with Pyongyang also looked like an effort to shift the burden and cost of U.S. policy failures onto China and the other negotiators and make them bear those costs. Several analysts have charged that American policy in revealing North Korean proliferation in 2002 aimed at frustrating Japanese and ROK initiatives to improve ties with the DPRK.⁸² And while that remains unproven, all the other parties have sought to enhance ties with North Korea in the belief that doing so improves their overall position in Northeast Asia. And it is at least possible that Washington's failure to engage North Korea directly after 2002 in a sustained way contributed to the decline in its relative power there. Therefore China, Russia, and South Korea are naturally unwilling either to bear these costs of American failure or unwillingness to engage with the DPRK, or submit to American demands that they desist from doing so. Consequently those demands upon China to pressure North Korea and the belief that China has this leverage and will use it to accommodate Washington's interests were and are seriously flawed and costly assumptions going into the talks.

Suggestions for the Future

Those assumptions underlie America's efforts to "outsource" the resolution of this problem to a multilateral forum increasingly dominated by China, but they represent a flawed estimate of the situation and of other parties' willingness to rescue America from its mistakes. Accordingly if the United States is to move beyond a sterile, stagnant, and unproductive crisis management mode it must rethink and reshape its engagement with the issues connected to North Korea's proliferation. It

⁸²-Seung-Ho Joo, "South Korea-U.S. Relations in Turbulent Waters," *Pacific Focus*, XX, No. 1, Spring 2006, p. 80.

also should rethink the strategically unsound outsourcing of a fundamental U.S. responsibility to China. Russian observers, for example, believed that Washington aimed to induce China to subordinate its Asia policy to an American agenda and initiatives, not deal with North Korea. That is obviously a threat to Russia whose greatest fear is marginalization in East Asia.⁸³ Second, depending upon China to carry out a policy in America's interest that Washington could not or would not do entailed compensations for China that probably do not benefit America and led observers to believe that China "was eating our lunch" in East Asia.⁸⁴ As Christoph Bluth noted,

North Korea acquired a more convincing nuclear capability, while at the same time continuing to receive economic support from China and South Korea and the prospects of exerting any real pressure on the DPRK continued to diminish. **Moreover, the United States became dependent upon China for the success of its policy, to such an extent that spillover into other areas became noticeable.**⁸⁵ (Bold author)

Given the upsurge in Chinese aggressiveness toward the U.S. since 2006 such outsourcing to China is probably not in either the U.S. or North Korea's interests. Indeed, if the real purpose of the talks has been to devise a formula for a new durable, and legitimate Asian security order that includes North Korea as a legitimate actor, leaving it to China to persuade the DPRK of the merits of any possible solution means leaving North Korea exclusively in China's "sphere of influence." That outcome is in neither the American nor the North Korean interest.

⁸³ - Tokyo, *Kyodo* (in English), January 27, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service Central Eurasia (Henceforth *FBIS SOV*), January 27, 2003.

⁸⁴ - David Shambaugh, "Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics," Brookings Institution, January 12, 2006, www.brookings.edu/events/2006/0112asia.aspx

⁸⁵ - Bluth, pp. 107-108.

Therefore Washington must take upon itself the formulation and pronouncement of a new strategic initiative targeted at North Korea to achieve not just denuclearization but also a new Asian order where North Korea can play a genuine role, develop its capabilities peacefully and do so in conditions of real security.

Three possibilities present themselves to the U.S. government. They also must be closely coordinated with Japan and South Korea. One is simply to renounce, either in formal action or in practical form the effort to resolve these issues through the six-party talks and either engage North Korea directly or simply wait for a better time. While Chinese officials have long argued for directly engaging North Korea, the most recent provocations and the U.S.'s (if not the Korean and Japanese) domestic politics precludes this gambit for now. And leaving the six-party process would create uproar throughout Asia and undermine the close coordination that has been a positive trend of the Obama Administration's policies toward South Korea and Japan.

Alternatively and second the U.S. could undertake a more robust direct engagement with North Korea through the formal medium of bilateral talks under the auspices of a renewed six-party process. The difficulties here, however, are daunting. The U.S. and its allies would then have to reverse their previous policies and accept North Korean provocations in return for a mere promise to talk without any hope of denuclearization or better behavior by North Korea. Again it is unlikely that the allies' domestic politics let alone their strong stands on North Korea's recent activities would permit such action and the costs of doing so could be very large indeed.

Nonetheless U.S. policies have clearly failed leaving us at an impasse. The current failure to rethink the policy attests to the Bush Administration's incapacity to enforce unity of policy in regard to Korea and to the U.S.' continuing poverty of imagination regarding changing

trends in Asia.⁸⁶ Here we must realize that North Korea clearly desires to engage the U.S. albeit on its terms. So for both sides to be able to engage each other we need to change the environment within which they operate. Since a unilateral or even coordinated allied offer to North Korea is highly improbable if not ruled out for now we need to change North Korea's operating environment and calculus in a different way. The Administration's reset policy with Russia gives us the opening necessary to do so.

Although the Administration's national security strategy and policy emphasize collaboration with Russia in Europe, the Gulf, Afghanistan, and on arms control, it has been totally silent with regard to cooperation in East Asia.⁸⁷ Neither U.S. scholarship nor policy takes Russia seriously as an Asian actor. This obviously frustrates Moscow greatly especially as in 2009-10 it has taken determined steps to portray itself as an Asian player.⁸⁸ Hitherto it has virtually always identified itself with China's positions on Korea yet there are signs of a growing suspicion of Chinese military power as shown in difficulties over arms sales, Chinese interest in

⁸⁶ - On the Bush Administration see Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Robert Carlin, "Talk to Me Later," in Phillip W. Yun and Gi-Wook Shin (eds.), *North Korea: 2005 and Beyond* (Palo Alto California: Walter Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, 2006), pp. 24-35; C. Kenneth Quinones, "Dualism in the Bush Administration's North Korea Policy," *Asian Perspective*, XXVII, No. 1, 2003, pp. 197-224; Karin Lee and Adam Miles, "North Korea on Capitol Hill," *Asian Perspective*, XXVIII, No. 4, 2004, pp. 185-207; Robert M. Hathaway and Jordan Tama, "The U.S. Congress and North Korea During the Clinton Years," *Asian Survey*, XLIV, No. 5, September/October 2004, pp. 711-733; Opening Statement of Henry J. Hyde, Before the Full Committee Hearing of the House Committee on International Relations "Six-Party Talks and the North Korean Nuclear Issue," October 6, 2005; Max Boot, "This Deal is No Bargain," *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 2005 at www.latimes.com; Nicholas Eberstadt, "A Skeptical View," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2006, p. 26.

⁸⁷ - National Security Strategy; Nicholas Eberstadt, "Reflections on the Bush Administration's North Korea Policy," *Korea and World Affairs*, XXXIII, No. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 45-63.

⁸⁸ - Stephen Blank, "The Paradoxes of Russia's Asian Policy," Forthcoming, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2011.

the Arctic, and China's "Great Stride" exercises of 2009.⁸⁹ Simultaneously Russia faces the danger of dominant Chinese economic and thus political influence in its Far East, and more than anyone else is alarmed enough about Korea to claim that the peninsula was on the brink of war. Certainly its Vostok-2010 exercises of June-July 2010 represent an accurate barometer of its fears.⁹⁰

Therefore there is good reason to suspect that a U.S. initiative treating it as a serious East Asian partner, engaging in a real dialogue on security threats there, and a strong public expression of U.S. willingness to invest in the Russian Far East in return for real guarantees of that investment would likely elicit a favorable Russian response. Certainly Russia benefits greatly by having an American option to use to counter China, and while it would not be an ally or even a full partner with us, that offer could move it some distance from its virtual lockstep with China regarding Korea. And such an initiative might also make Pyongyang sit up and take notice. While obviously such an initiative must be correlated with Japan and South Korea that is not an insuperable problem even though Russo-Japanese relations are bad now due to the Kurile Islands or Northern Territories issue. Historically America has supported Japan's claim since Theodore Roosevelt's strategy of separating Japan and Russia from each other. But Asia has changed and a resurgent Japan is quite unlikely unless the alliance breaks down which could happen over North Korean nuclearization. Instead the new issue is a rising China that upsets all previous strategic considerations. We would probably

⁸⁹ - Stephen Blank, "The Arctic: A Future Source of Russo-Chinese Discord?" *Jamestown China Brief*, X, No. 24, December 3, 2010; Stephen Blank, *Shrinking Ground: Russia's Decline in Global Arms Sales*, Occasional paper, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., October 2010; Jacob Kipp, "Russia's Nuclear Posture and the Threat that Dare not Speak its Name," Forthcoming in Stephen Blank (ed.), *Russian Nuclear Weapons, Past, Present, and Future* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011).

⁹⁰ - Kipp.

be doing Japan a service if we made clear that it should accept the 1956 offer of two of the four Kurile Islands as the best it will get now and that the danger from a nuclear North Korea and a rising China that defends it outweighs the benefits of domestic posturing for islands that it will not otherwise get. Moscow could add its leverage to a U.S. plan to engage the North Korean government under the auspices of the six-party process, thus accepting China's recommendation. If Russia were to move along the lines initiated by the U.S. as suggested here, it might then be possible to get North Korea back to the table under conditions acceptable to the other parties and with the promise of an expanded direct U.S. engagement which ultimately is essential to any lasting peace process here.

Admittedly this initiative might not work. But we are facing an impasse that will only become more dangerous before it becomes less threatening. Second we must accept that our previous policy has failed and that the present six-party process cannot deliver what we and the other parties want. Yet we cannot simply renounce that process without incurring severe costs. Nor can we just simply engage Pyongyang without any concern for its recent actions. Likewise, any Korean policy that does not reckon with strategic changes now occurring in Asia is doomed to failure. Engaging Russia not only preserves the six-party process but with a different dynamic, it strengthens the equilibrium of power in Asia while opening the way to direct discussions with North Korea which are essential and in both our and North Korea's interest unless we wish to see it collapse or become a Chinese satellite. Previously this author has advocated direct engagement with proliferators, hard as it is, for there is no other viable road to nonproliferation.⁹¹ But in this case there also

⁹¹-Stephen Blank, "Prospects for Russo-American Cooperation in Halting Nuclear Proliferation," in Stephen J. Blank (ed.), *Prospects for U.S.-Russian Security Cooperation* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2009), pp. 169-284.

appears to be no other viable road to incorporating a peaceful North Korea in a stable yet dynamic Asian order. If there are better alternatives available to achieve these goals then they should be offered now.

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