

The North Korea Problem and the Necessity for South Korean Leadership

Policy Report

Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center

March 4, 2013



THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN
ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During a four-year leadership transition, North Korea's approach toward the international community has become even more aggressive. The new Swiss-educated leader, Kim Jong Un, dashed initial hopes that he might take the regime in a more positive direction than his father, the late Kim Jong Il. In 2010 Pyongyang killed fifty South Koreans in two attacks, and it has warned of further strikes. With its third nuclear test in February and another rocket test last December, North Korea seems determined to develop a deliverable nuclear warhead to threaten the United States.

The international community has reached a critical juncture in dealing with North Korea. If the regime continues on its current path, more serious provocations may occur, increasing the risk of instability in the region and the danger of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Two decades of American-led policy have not succeeded in changing this trajectory. Moreover, with Washington judging that North Korea is not prepared to give up its nuclear weapons program, there appears to be no political basis for further U.S. negotiations with North Korea.

The chief hope for the resumption of North Korea diplomacy now rests with the new South Korean president, Park Geun-hye. She campaigned on a platform of a "trustpolitik" to build mutual confidence and improve North-South relations. Her conservative credentials provide her with considerable political leeway at home for such an effort. Moreover, Park heads a country that has become a global leading middle power, giving her substantial influence with the international community, including key players such as China.

President Park should appoint a very senior presidential envoy to advise her on North Korea policy, initiate contact with Pyongyang, and engage in high-level talks with the regime, analogous to the role that former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry played in the Clinton administration. The United States can be expected to support such efforts as long as it is confident that its ultimate objective—the complete elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons—is not compromised.

South Korea should aim to take the lead in dealing not only with inter-Korean relations but also the nuclear issue. It should seek an early resumption of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing by persuading Pyongyang to freeze its nuclear program while negotiations are underway and back away from its insistence that it will not abandon nuclear weapons.

To revitalize the Six-Party Talks, four countries—South Korea, North Korea, the United States, and China—should constitute a subcommittee within the Talks to negotiate the key issues. The goal should be to verify North Korea's complete denuclearization and to simultaneously sign a peace mechanism no later than the end of the Obama administration. This will sharpen the focus of the Talks and put pressure on all four participants, but especially on North Korea and the PRC, to make the hard choices necessary to reach a successful conclusion.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report by scholars and policy experts¹ at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center is based in part on (1) their research for a Yonhap News Agency-sponsored symposium on Northeast Asia security in Seoul in early February, when they also held meetings with then-President Lee Myung-bak and President-elect Park Geun-hye and her chief foreign policy advisers, as well as with leading South Korean progressive intellectuals;² and (2) a workshop on North Korea policy at Stanford University on February 14–15, supported by the Koret Foundation of San Francisco, which included top current and former U.S., South Korean, and UN officials and leading academic experts on the Korea problem.³

1 Coauthors are listed at the end of the report.

2 Event details are available at <http://aparc.stanford.edu/events/7627/>.

3 More information at <http://aparc.stanford.edu/events/7448>.



Members of Shorenstein APARC meet with President-elect Park on February 4, 2013 (from left: Gi-Wook Shin, Karl Eikenberry, Michael Armacost).

THE NORTH KOREA PROBLEM AND THE NECESSITY FOR SOUTH KOREAN LEADERSHIP

A CRITICAL MOMENT ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

The international community has reached a critical juncture in dealing with North Korea. During the past four and a half years of leadership transition from Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un, Pyongyang has acted increasingly aggressively. It revealed a long-denied advanced uranium enrichment capability and conducted two tests of nuclear devices and three long-range rocket launches in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Some technical experts now believe it is possible that North Korea has miniaturized nuclear devices for use as nuclear warheads. North Korea continues to develop medium- and long-range missiles, probably making it a matter of time until it can deliver a nuclear warhead not only to East Asia but also to the United States. Pyongyang is warning that it will take “second and third stronger steps in succession” if the international community imposes additional sanctions. In 2010 North Korea’s military killed fifty South Koreans in two surprise conventional attacks, and on February 19 of this year a North

Korean official speaking before the United Nations threatened South Korea with “final destruction.” The belligerence of North Korea’s rhetoric has increased since Kim Jong Un succeeded his father in December 2011. If the regime remains on its current path, more serious North Korean provocations may occur, increasing the risk of instability in the region and the danger of conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

THE LIMITS OF U.S.-LED DIPLOMACY

Two decades of American-led policy have been unable to prevent these developments and under current conditions success appears even less likely. While relying on the U.S.-South Korean military alliance to deter conventional North Korea attacks, the United States engaged in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with North Korea to end its nuclear and long-range missile programs in exchange for normalized relations and economic aid. Ultimately, American and North Korean demands proved unbridgeable. Pyongyang rebuffed the new Obama administration’s offer to negotiate and revealed its real intentions in early 2009 when it conducted its first fully successful nuclear test. The Obama administration was again angered in early 2012 when, within days of announcing the so-called Leap Day Deal to freeze some of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, North Korea declared it would conduct another rocket launch. Meanwhile, North Korea has authoritatively stated that it has no intention of abandoning its nuclear weapons programs until all other countries do, and it has revised its constitution to declare itself a nuclear power. Pyongyang says it is no longer willing to negotiate denuclearization and will only talk with the United States about a peace treaty and mutual “arms control.”

Today virtually no one in Washington, D.C. judges that North Korea will negotiate away its nuclear programs in the foreseeable future on terms acceptable to the United States. While not abandoning the goal of achieving the complete dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs, the United States government is now also focusing on the proliferation threat posed by North Korea. For example, on February 15 the House of Representatives approved 412-2 a resolution that demands additional international sanctions on North Korea and calls on the PRC to “take immediate actions” to stop North Korea’s use of Chinese territory for its proliferation activities.

Some private-sector Americans have suggested that the United States should accept North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons for the time being in exchange for a pledge to suspend nuclear testing and not to proliferate. But U.S. administrations are highly unlikely to adopt such a policy, especially after the collapse of the Leap Day Deal last year under which the United States was to supply North Korea with humanitarian food aid and North Korea would suspend nuclear and missile tests. The record of North Korean nuclear deception and proliferation has left Pyongyang without credibility in American eyes, and the United States has no means of verifying any such North Korean agreement. Even if a nonproliferation agreement could somehow be verified, “acceptance” of a limited North Korean nuclear program could undermine American alliances with South Korea and Japan and contribute to their eventually “going nuclear.” It could seriously weaken the international nonproliferation regime at a time when President Obama has set the long-term goal of achieving a world without nuclear weapons.

Moreover, as John Kerry indicated in one of his first public remarks as secretary of state, Washington believes that concessions to North Korea on its nuclear and missile programs would set an unacceptable precedent for the international effort to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability. Even engaging in diplomatic talks with North Korea simply to remain in communication is politically fraught in Washington—note that the U.S. government continues not to confirm that senior U.S. officials secretly visited Pyongyang for talks in 2012. Opinion polls show that the American public dislikes the regimes of North Korea and Iran more than any other in the world. Nevertheless, most Americans still do not regard North Korea as a serious security threat to the United States. The American body politic tends to see concessions or assistance to North Korea as reflecting “weakness” and “appeasement,” or as the payment of “blackmail” to an odious regime.

U.S. strategic and political realities thus preclude meaningful nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang until the regime is prepared to take a different approach. With the prospects for success assessed to be very low and the political risk for failure high, few in Washington are likely to commit the time, political capital, and bureaucratic effort required to negotiate with the DPRK.

THE CONTINUING NECESSITY OF DIPLOMACY

Without changing the current dynamics regarding North Korea, however, the threat Pyongyang poses to South Korea in particular may continue to increase. The possession of even a small nuclear arsenal may embolden North Korean leaders to stage more frequent and more violent conventional attacks on South Korea. Pyongyang will likely intensify its campaign to try to intimidate and divide the South Korean body politic using the threat or the actual use of force. The United States will undoubtedly continue to intensify sanctions on North Korea, which may lead to a further rise in tensions and an increase in the risk of miscalculations, accidents, and escalation.

Although prospects for near-term success with respect to ultimate objectives are poor, diplomacy remains a valuable, low-cost way to address the challenges posed by North Korea. At a minimum, diplomacy can help to manage the North Korea situation and could contribute to positive changes in the attitude and approach of North Korea’s new leaders.

Hopes for reviving the diplomatic process may depend on the will and ability of political leaders to capitalize on the more or less simultaneous change or re-election of leadership teams in all six governments on and around the Korean Peninsula, including the United States. Although none of the leadership changes have resulted in governments with fundamentally different policies toward North Korea, the change of even one of these governments is enough to prompt a round of consultations and policy adjustments among the six. Change in so many governments opens up the possibility of extensive policy reviews on the part of one or more of the countries and of initiatives to resume diplomatic efforts with Pyongyang.

A DIPLOMATIC OPENING—THE ADVENT OF THE PARK ADMINISTRATION

The most significant change of administration in regard to North Korea policy may be the inauguration of Park Geun-hye as South Korea's new president on February 25. Reflecting widespread popular sentiment that the North Korea policy of her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, was too "hardline" and overly focused on making immediate progress on the nuclear problem, Park ran on a platform of supporting greater efforts to engage North Korea diplomatically and providing humanitarian assistance with few conditions. Park has dubbed her approach "trustpolitik," a step-by-step effort to build mutual confidence that would result in greatly increased inter-Korean exchanges and South Korean economic cooperation with the North, with the aim of also opening a path to resolving the nuclear issue.

There is reason to believe that President Park's policy is more than campaign rhetoric. She has made clear that she takes her pledges to ROK voters seriously even though resource constraints will limit what she can do. Regarding North Korea in particular, presumably she, like most South Koreans, wishes to find a way to change or mitigate the circumstances that have led to North Korea's increasingly aggressive behavior in recent years. Moreover, the division of the Korean nation has been *the* national issue for South Korean leaders, and most have wanted to try their hand at negotiating with their counterpart in Pyongyang for progress toward reconciliation and peaceful unification.

Although Pyongyang's historical practice has been to deal with Seoul only on its terms, including demanding "payment in advance" for summits, it will not be able to continue to do so indefinitely. The Republic of Korea has become a major "middle power" on the international stage in the two decades since its democratization. Moreover, the already enormous gap in the relative international weight of the two countries continues to widen. No other country is more interested in the North Korea problem than South Korea, and it is also the most willing to devote the resources to deal with it. Both the United States and the PRC know that their influence on the issue will be significantly diminished if their own North Korea policy is at odds with that of the South Korean government. North Korea may be loathe to deal with South Korea except to extract benefits, but its options in that regard are narrowing, whether it fully recognizes it at the moment or not.

President Park has a powerful domestic advantage in dealing with North Korea that her predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun did not have. Many conservative South Koreans deeply distrusted Presidents Kim and Roh as progressives who were "naïve" about North Korean intentions. As a conservative and the daughter of the late President Park Chung-hee, Park Geun-hye will have the support not only of South Korean progressives but also of many conservatives in any effort to approach North Korea. Just as "only Nixon could go to China," the conservative Park is much better positioned than her progressive predecessors to forge a badly needed domestic consensus to engage Pyongyang.

Although North Korea's third nuclear test on February 12 of this year and its rocket launch on December 12 of last year have complicated any effort by President Park to engage North Korea in the near future, there may be an opportunity for diplomatic reengagement if Pyongyang desists from further provocations until Park's new administration can share its views directly with North Korean leaders. That North Korea's official media have so far refrained from rhetorical attacks on Park and her new government has helped to leave

an opening for this. Pyongyang would be making a serious mistake if it engaged in further provocations while President Park is organizing her government and elaborating her North Korea policy, an error it made with the new U.S. government of Barack Obama in early 2009.

NEEDED: A SOUTH KOREAN “PERRY PROCESS”

The nature of the North Korean system and diplomatic experience in dealing with it argue that President Park should appoint a very senior presidential envoy to advise her on North Korea policy, initiate contact with Pyongyang, and engage in high-level talks with the regime. Lower-ranking DPRK officials do not have the authority to conduct serious negotiations and can actually make matters worse by their resort to propagandistic positions. The United States achieved relative success in dealing with North Korea when it named former Secretary of Defense William Perry as its point man on North Korea in 1998. President Park should choose as her North Korea envoy and policy adviser a person of similar stature, someone who has her full confidence and is respected and trusted by South Korean conservatives and progressives alike.

Although the Obama administration and the new Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are not themselves prepared to launch a diplomatic initiative toward North Korea under the current circumstances, the United States government can be expected to provide quiet support to President Park’s efforts to engage North Korea. Japan, which under Abe is focused on dealing with the PRC and thus seeks an even closer relationship with the United States, will follow suit. Since the Obama administration’s inception in 2009, the United States has placed even more emphasis on supporting its allies, especially South Korea. Washington’s chief interest will be to ensure that its ultimate objective—the complete elimination of North Korea’s nuclear weapons—not be compromised; there is every reason to believe that the Park administration fully shares that interest.

Moreover, the Obama administration, while not optimistic that South Korean engagement will change North Korea’s fundamental approach, hopes that any such effort will ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula and reduce the risk of conflict. American officials’ concern about the possibility of major conflict on the peninsula has been considerably heightened since North Korea’s two military attacks on South Korea in 2010. Political insecurity in North Korea associated with the leadership transition, coupled with the possibly emboldening effects of having nuclear devices, may have contributed significantly to the attacks. U.S. officials are deeply concerned not only that North Korea may engage in further such provocations but also that North Korea might further escalate the situation if South Korean forces, for the first time since the Korean War, actually retaliate against the next North Korean attack, as South Korea has warned it will do. Such a situation could quickly result in major conflict on and around the peninsula.

FROM INTER-KOREAN TALKS TO SIX-PARTY TALKS

In engaging North Korea, South Korea should aim to take the lead in dealing not only with inter-Korean relations but also the nuclear issue. Without a resolution to the nuclear issue, progress in inter-Korean relations is likely to be unsustainable, both because of domestic opinion in South Korea and because of American and international concerns. North Korea has consistently taken the position that only the United States can be its negotiating partner on the nuclear issue, but the United States no longer feels it has any basis for negotiating with North Korea. With China still wedded to a policy of support for the status quo in North Korea, that effectively leaves only the possibility of South Korea making diplomatic progress on the nuclear issue. In fact, no country can explain more effectively to top North Korean leaders, in their own language, the dangers of their current course and the potential benefits of following a new path.

One aim of South Korean efforts should be an early resumption of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing, where Seoul's leadership can be further leveraged. South Korea should seek to persuade Pyongyang that it must reopen the door to those multilateral talks by meeting the U.S. preconditions of instituting a complete freeze on further nuclear and long-range missile tests while negotiations are underway and backing away from its insistence that it will not abandon nuclear weapons until all others also have. The United States and the PRC should strongly support such a South Korean effort.

A SHARPENED FOCUS ON THE KEY ISSUES

Since the Six-Party Talks have not been held in over four years and North Korea actually accelerated its nuclear and missile programs after the Talks began a decade ago, it is time for the parties to consider adjustments to the format and agenda to sharpen the focus and improve the prospects for success. Russia and Japan have important national interests in a resolution of the North Korea problem, but their influence and roles are limited compared to those of the other four. The Six Parties agreed that a subset of the talks would be devoted to negotiating a Korean Peninsula peace mechanism, but no such talks have been held, as the United States insisted that substantial progress first be made on North Korean denuclearization. The presumed members of such peace mechanism talks are in fact the two Korean governments, the United States, and China, as the parties most involved in the actual conduct of the Korean War and the countries most involved in the North Korea problem today.

Since Russia and Japan will not volunteer to reduce their role in the Six-Party Talks and the PRC and the United States will not want to exclude Russia and Japan, the problem should be finessed by a resumption of the Six-Party Talks that includes the early initiation of peace treaty talks among North and South Korea, the United States, and China. As the treaty must be more than the signing of a sheet of paper declaring the end of war if it is to be meaningful, this four-party subset of the Six-Party Talks should become the focus of major Six-Party deliberations.

In the talks, the four parties should intensively negotiate all aspects of the Korean problem that constitute a threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula, including the nuclear issue, missile and other weapons of mass destruction issues, conventional military deployments,

demilitarized zone and maritime problems, and normalization of relations, including the removal of sanctions against North Korea. Peace regime and denuclearization talks should proceed simultaneously with the goal of achieving a comprehensive agreement, although its implementation would of necessity take place on a step-by-step basis. By taking this approach, the talks can sharpen the issues and put pressure on all four participants, but especially on North Korea and the PRC, to make the hard choices necessary to reach a successful conclusion. The PRC remains key to resolving the North Korea problem, but it has not felt the need to adopt clear-cut positions in part because the talks seemed so far from making progress.

There is certainly no guarantee that such talks will succeed. Similar four-party peace talks were conducted at the end of the 1990s, but North Korea consistently refused to discuss any specific tension-reduction and confidence-building measures to lend substance to a peace treaty. Since then, however, it should have become clear to all parties, especially China, that the threat to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula has increased as a result of North Korea's determined pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and will likely continue to increase if Pyongyang remains on its current trajectory. The Obama administration remains genuinely open to striking a comprehensive accord with North Korea but only if it is willing to truly and completely end those programs. The aim therefore should be to achieve a comprehensive agreement, including a detailed timetable for the implementation of all steps before the end of the Obama administration, the culmination of which would be the verification of North Korea's denuclearization and the signing of a Four-Party Peace Treaty in 2016, guaranteed by Russia, Japan, and the United Nations. If the process extends beyond 2016, the changes of administration that will occur in the United States, and one year later in South Korea, could prove disruptive of what will be extremely complex negotiations.

WHY SOUTH KOREA MUST CONTINUE TO ESCHEW THE BOMB

As ambitious as such an effort would be and as difficult as it might be to achieve success, other options seem less likely to succeed. Of course, the North Korea problem is a complex issue, and diplomacy is only one, albeit a key, means of addressing it. The United States and South Korea must bolster their alliance military capabilities to deter and defend against any conventional North Korean attack, and they need to continue careful planning for the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korea in 2015 to ensure against any diminution of readiness. The United States must also make clear that it will continue to extend a nuclear umbrella over South Korea.

South Korea's government must continue to reject calls for a reintroduction of American tactical nuclear weapons into South Korea and for South Korea's development of its own nuclear weapons. The presence of American tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean soil would not bolster the existing American nuclear umbrella. It would only increase the risk of a nuclear accident on the peninsula. South Korean development of nuclear weapons would be a disastrously bad decision, reversing South Korea's enormous progress in making itself not only a regional but also a global leader.

The United States and the PRC do, however, need to take seriously the anxieties that North Korea's continuing development of nuclear weapons and long-range missile

have awakened in South Korea. In addition to prominent voices in the political, business, and media communities calling for South Korea to consider acquiring nuclear weapons, recent opinion polls show nearly two-thirds of the South Korean public now favor the development of nuclear weapons. This may be intended in part to send a message to the United States and others that they need to do more to stop North Korea's nuclear program, but it also reflects genuine and increasing concern that North Korea's nuclear program could eventually undermine the American nuclear umbrella and thus South Korea's security. This situation underscores the need for American and Chinese support of South Korean diplomatic initiatives toward North Korea.

Such South Korean concerns have complicated the renegotiation of the U.S.-South Korean agreement, expiring next year, for cooperation regarding the civil uses of atomic power (the "123 agreement"). Aiming to be a world leader in the export of commercial nuclear power facilities, South Korea wants to be able to offer its customers a complete package—not only nuclear power facilities but also nuclear fuel and spent fuel disposal services—and also solve its own spent fuel storage problem. Specifically, South Korea is calling on the United States to allow it to enrich uranium for nuclear fuel and reprocess spent fuel using an experimental process called pyroprocessing. Citing the United States' longstanding agreement allowing Japan to engage in similar activities, some South Koreans have suggested that U.S. rejection of their current demands would contravene South Korean sovereignty and could sour the Korean public's feelings about the American alliance.

The United States will need to deal with this issue with the utmost sensitivity, balancing numerous important concerns. These include maintaining the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance, avoiding complicating the resolution of the North Korea problem, and not setting undesirable precedents in terms of post-9/11 global nonproliferation. The United States and South Korea should keep the broad picture of overall security cooperation in mind and seek creative solutions to South Korean concerns. These might include South Korean investment in existing American and third-country uranium enrichment facilities and joint research into the long-term disposition of spent nuclear fuel.

A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

With the challenges North Korea poses increasing and the options for influencing Pyongyang in the short-term limited, the United States and South Korea must take a long-term approach to the problem. This will require continued intensive consultation and coordination between the allies, and would benefit greatly by more consensus among the South Korean electorate. The North Korea problem has complex origins and aspects, and must be addressed using all available national and allied resources. Even if the prospects currently are far from bright, diplomacy is an essential tool in dealing with North Korea. It is a means for enhancing domestic and allied policy agreement, increasing support among the international community, assessing Pyongyang's intentions, managing threats in the short- to mid-term, and encouraging positive change in North Korea over the long term. It is hoped that these recommendations will contribute to the debate on how best to use diplomacy to address the North Korea problem.

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