

CONFERENCE REPORT



NORMALIZATION OF U.S.-DPRK RELATIONS

A CONFERENCE ORGANIZED BY THE
NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (NCAFP) AND
THE KOREA SOCIETY

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**SUMMARY REPORT
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INTRODUCTION

On March 5, 2007, the NCAFP and the Korea Society co-sponsored a meeting in New York with a delegation from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) led by the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kim Kye Gwan. American participants included: The Honorable Henry A. Kissinger, The Honorable Madeleine Albright, two U.S. officials dealing with North Korea, two members of the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and several academics. A complete list of participants and the agenda are included in the appendix.

The Track II meeting took place in the morning of March 5, 2007, preceding the official dialogue between the North Korean and American governments. It was the fifth dialogue sponsored by the NCAFP since 2003.

The NCAFP and the Korea Society also hosted a luncheon for Vice Minister Kim and his delegation on March 3, 2007. There were several smaller, private meetings as well.

OVERVIEW

Over the course of these meetings, Vice Minister Kim made it clear that the DPRK wants to normalize relations with the United States and to develop a relationship where both parties' strategic interests are met. However, he did express some doubts about the United States' intentions. Is the policy shift, currently underway in Washington, tactical or strategic? Does it represent a long-term commitment to the DPRK by the U.S. government?

Several American participants argued that there is a serious commitment in the U.S. government to carry out the February 13, 2007, agreement and that this could bring about a fundamental change in the security situation in Northeast Asia in which all the parties could achieve their goals. Moreover, this is not a partisan issue in the United States. Such an agreement would be supported by both major political parties, an important point considering the upcoming Presidential elections in 2008.

Vice Minister Kim also argued that it is necessary to find a “shortcut” to the normalization of relations through contacts “at the highest level.” Several Americans responded that if the first stage of the February 13 agreement is carried out smoothly, it would be possible to have a ministerial meeting in April 2007. This would be in accordance with the provision of the February 13 agreement that says, “once the initial actions are implemented, the six parties will promptly hold a ministerial meeting to confirm the implementation of the Joint Statement and explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia.”

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

The first American participant opened the meeting by observing that the parties are now at a point where fundamental strategic choices can be made. The September 2005 agreement defined the goal, and the February 13, 2007, agreement described a method to achieve the goal. A variety of steps needs to be taken within the next 30 or 60 days, and these steps should be carried out with determination and conviction.

This American went on to say that the February 13 agreement indicates a fundamental change in the direction of relations between the DPRK and the United States. It was not that long ago that the United States would not even talk to the DPRK. Now, there is a means of normalizing relations.

Are these moves by each side tactical or strategic? Some in the United States might fear that the North Korean moves are simply tactical, and there are surely some in North Korea who fear that U.S. moves are only tactical. But, the American speaker affirmed, there is a serious commitment on the part of the U.S. government to bring about a fundamental change in the situation in Northeast Asia. The United States is prepared to discuss a peace agreement to replace the armistice and to move towards a Northeast Asia security system. This presents an opportunity not only to solve the nuclear problem but also to create a structure of regional security in which all parties can achieve their goals.

The speaker went on to say that this issue is not a partisan one. There would not be a controversy between the Republicans and the Democrats. The two governments [the U.S. and DPRK] need to move forward as quickly as possible so that the new Administration in 2008 can carry it out on a bi-partisan basis. He concluded that we are at a moment when the American side is seriously committed to improving our relations.

The second American speaker agreed with the general thrust of the remarks made by the opening speaker. Now, this speaker said that a window of opportunity exists; both sides need to take advantage of it. The United States has no hostile intent towards the DPRK. A true peace is needed on the Korean peninsula. An opportunity was missed in 2000, when the Clinton Administration sought to normalize relations, but now there is a new opportunity. The significant change in U.S. policy should be met with flexibility and positive resolve on the part of the DPRK. The six-party talks have yielded a framework for denuclearization which should be supported by both major political parties in the United States. We should not wait for the next U.S. election. If we do, it will be harder to resolve the issues. There are many unwelcome scenarios. Now is the time, the speaker concluded, to work on developing a new security system in Northeast Asia.

Vice Minister Kim responded to the two opening American speakers by agreeing that we should not miss this new opportunity. Both sides, he said, need to implement in good faith the February 13 agreement and to be faithful to the September 2005 agreement. The United States and the DPRK should respect each other and live peacefully.

Vice Minister Kim went on to say that it is in the United States' interest to have good relations with the DPRK. He pointed out that Dr. Kissinger had helped to open up the first door to Northeast Asia, China. Why not, he said, open up the second door, North Korea?

Vice Minister Kim also stressed the importance of finding a "shortcut" to improved relations: contacts at the "highest levels." He also expressed an interest in having a dialogue with the United States about U.S. and DPRK strategic interests in the region.

In another meeting, Vice Minister Kim spelled out his views on this subject in more detail. He said that if the United States is not hostile and is friendly to the DPRK, Pyongyang wants to become friends with the United States. As early as 1997, he continued, President Kim Jong Il said that we [North Koreans] no longer need to be adversaries with the United States. We believe that nations have no eternal enemies or eternal friends, only eternal interests. We are a small nation surrounded by big powers, Kim said. My country has been fought over by big powers on several occasions. Several Americans have said that the United States does not want any big power to dominate Asia. We fully agree. There is a potential for conflict among the big powers in Northeast Asia even in the foreseeable future. Japan could move away from the United States. The contradictions between China and Japan could grow. So, if the United States were to develop good relations with North Korea, it would be in the strategic interest of the U.S.

Kim continued to elaborate: We don't want North Korea to become a battlefield for other nations and the United States can contribute to that end. Also, we could help the United States strengthen the NPT regime, and we could help in the global struggle against terrorism. For its part, the United States could remove the last legacy of the Cold War by arranging a peace settlement on the Korea peninsula. This process was begun by

the first President Bush, who initiated U.S.-DPRK contact for the first time. So, it would be a historical event if the second President Bush could finish this job. There is no reason for the United States and the DPRK not to have good strategic relations if both sides have the will. Since we have concluded the February 13, 2007 agreement, there is now an opportunity for better relations.

An American participant pointed out that the present situation is different from that in 2000, when the Clinton Administration simply ran out of time to normalize relations with the DPRK. Now, we have adequate time. Another American participant observed that the Clinton Administration ran out of time in 2000 because the North Koreans did not respond rapidly enough; he said this was a mistake that should not be repeated.

In response to a question about what he saw as the main obstacles to implementing the February agreement, Vice Minister Kim said he did not see any big problems in implementing that agreement. We [North Koreans] agreed to shut down Yongbyon, he said, and the other five parties are obliged to do certain things. The United States is obliged to change its policy toward the DPRK by removing North Korea from the terrorism list and the Trading with the Enemy Act.

Vice Minister Kim then reiterated his point that contacts at the highest level are needed for a strategic decision. He said this was clear from the visit to Pyongyang made by Secretary Albright in 2000. Lower-level contacts are good, but contacts at the highest level are necessary. If this is impossible, he said, other arrangements should be made, e.g., special envoys to carry messages from the highest authorities.

Vice Minister Kim also said on several occasions that if North Korea dismantles Yongbyon, it will want a light-water reactor to produce electricity. He maintained that some system of inspection that would include U.S. experts could alleviate the fear that a light-water reactor could be used to produce fissile materials. Additionally, by bringing in fuel rods from abroad, some of our concerns could be mitigated.

Afternoon Session

In the afternoon session, an American speaker began by arguing that North Korea can play an important role in the security system in Northeast Asia if we can work our way through the February agreement. Then, we could reach the point where the DPRK is not a buffer or a pawn but a player and a respected member of the security system.

Another American speaker said that the United States should forge a strategic relationship with North Korea just as it did with China. We should see North Korea not as a buffer but as a partner. There should be a senior-level strategic dialogue.

Still, another U.S. speaker said that Congress supports the Administration's policy towards North Korea. He asserted that Senator Lugar also supports Track II efforts such

as the NCAFP-Korea Society effort, which can help create better understanding between the two sides. Foreign policy, he said, is often based on faulty assumptions.

Finally, another American speaker said that the United States has an interest in a completely transformed relationship with a country that has been our adversary for half a century.

CONCLUSION

At one point Vice Minister Kim stated that the DPRK was driven to detonate its nuclear weapon because it had been seized by international pressure and because the United States called his country an axis of evil and an outpost of tyranny. However, throughout the course of these talks, he was relieved to hear that any military buildup in the Northeast Asia region was not directly aimed at the DPRK, but was rather there to support the United States' overarching geopolitical strategy in the region.

The majority of the American participants reiterated the message that the United States does not harbor any hostile intent and does not seek territory, but that if security in the region is to be achieved, it will be done so through confidence in the security structure, not through nuclear threats. The U.S. believes that the people of the DPRK should live in peace and prosperity. However, with that in mind, the United States must see "actions for actions." If the U.S. views the DPRK as dragging its feet, it will breed skepticism and mistrust and hinder the forward moving momentum.

In the case of China, strategic and geopolitical interests precipitated opening the door between the two countries; it was not based on ideology. Why should it be any different with the DPRK? Both countries share several common strategic interests, and by working together to denuclearize the peninsula, the normalization of relations that seemed like such an illusory goal just a short time ago may now become a reality.