



U.S.-DPRK RELATIONS AT A CROSSROADS: DANGER OF DRIFT



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

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The NCAFP and The Korea Society hosted a delegation from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) led by Ambassador Ri Gun on October 30, 2009. The American side included three former U.S. ambassadors to South Korea, a total of eight former U.S. officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations, two staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and several prominent scholars.

The tone of the meeting was very candid and yet not antagonistic.

1. North Koreans Strongly Justify April Satellite/Missile launch

The North Koreans strongly justified their April "satellite launch" as a legitimate action within international norms and simply a "scientific development" project. They condemned the U.S./UN response as illegitimate. The fact that UNSCR 1874 was supported by the members of the Six Party Talks contributed to North Korea's disillusionment with the Six Party forum. A U.S. observer who attended both the La Jolla and the New York meetings and traveled with the DPRK delegation said that their weak justifications for the launch gave more credence to the likelihood that there were strong domestic reasons for going ahead with the launch that trumped the promise of an extended hand from Obama.

2. Continued Ambiguity On North Korea's Ultimate Denuclearization Intentions

The North Koreans said that they "regard themselves" as a nuclear power but they do not seek recognition as such. At the same time, they said that a denuclearized peninsula has been the "consistent stand" of the DPRK, the "last wish" of Kim Il-Sung, and that General Kim Jong-Il had expressed his commitment to eventual denuclearization to China's Premier Wen Jiabao in their recent meeting. But they will not give up their "nuclear deterrent" without "very reassuring actions" by the United States.

3. The Need for a Permanent Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula

In order for North Korea to denuclearize, the North Koreans said, there is a need for a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula to replace the present armistice agreement, not just oral security assurances. The present arrangement is simply a cease-fire. This cease-fire needs to be transformed into a permanent peace regime. “Until we get (such a permanent peace regime) we are not free to give up nuclear weapons.”

4. The Six Party Process is Still Alive

The North Koreans said that they clearly prefer bilateral talks with the United States but that they are also open to, if less enthusiastic about, the Six Party Talks. One North Korean said that North Korea supported bilateral talks “followed by multilateral talks.” Another North Korean said that they need U.S.-North Korean talks “within the framework of the Six Party Talks.” He continued: “we need security talks with the U.S. to give us assurances and this will drive the Six Party process forward.” The North Koreans believe that the other parties have ganged up on them, as evidenced by the U.N. sanctions.

5. Sanctions

The North Koreans want the UN Security Council sanctions lifted but they explicitly stated that lifting the sanctions is not a precondition for dialogue. This stance may be partly influenced by a desire to show that sanctions are not hurting them. They said, “our hope is that if there is progress in the dialogue with the U.S.” the sanctions will be removed. But if there are harsher sanctions against North Korea, this “will lead to a harsher response.”

6. Concerns About Diplomatic Drift

Both sides expressed concern about the danger of diplomatic drift. Several Americans cautioned that if the U.S. comes to regard the problem as one of “long term management” of a nuclearized DPRK, North Korea will continue to build its nuclear capabilities. In the meantime, the U.S. would start adjusting its alliances and its relations with China in a way that will heighten tensions in the region.

There would also be the accompanying danger of nuclear proliferation. One North Korean said that North Korea had “on several occasions” said it had no intentions of proliferating but “you may drive us into a corner.”

7. The Need for a “Fundamental Change” in U.S.-DPRK Relations

The North Koreans said they were pleased with recent “good signs” of the resumption of bilateral relations with the U.S. These included President Clinton’s visit to North Korea and the State Department approval of visas for this DPRK delegation. General Kim Jong-Il has said that North Korea is prepared for engagement with the United States at any time. North Korea hopes “to find common ground” and “common stakes” with the U.S. in order to bring about a “long range accommodation.” The U.S. and the DPRK “share some strategic interests” including the

prevention of any single nation from dominating the region. And the DPRK “may welcome” a U.S. presence in the region if it has good relations with the U.S. One North Korean spoke of the need for “high-level engagement” between the U.S. and the DRPK.

8. The Potential for a Package Deal

An American spelled out the potential of a package deal that would include in exchange for denuclearization by the DPRK: 1. a path to normalization of relations among all six parties; 2. progress on bilateral and multilateral economic and technical assistance; 3. replacing the Korean War armistice with a peace agreement; 4. providing energy assistance; 5. providing bilateral and multilateral security guarantees; 6. lifting all sanctions. A North Korean responded that this would be a “good package.” Another American said this sounded like the approach (grand bargain) that has already been tried.

9. North Korea Remains Open to Economic Engagement and Track II Dialogue

The North Koreans said they were not opposed to economic and cultural exchanges even as the nuclear issue remains unsettled. One North Korean said he thought the prospects for foreign investment in North Korea are “promising” and that “we have abundant human resources” and high educational levels and a large number of intellectuals. North Korea’s apparent enthusiasm for the prospect of improved economic relations with South Korea, Japan and the U.S. may reflect their unease with relying so heavily on China -- their Behemoth of a neighbor -- and all the historical baggage that comes along with this. They also seemed open to non-governmental talks such as this one.

10. DRPK-ROK Relations “Changing” for the Better

A North Korean said that the mood and atmosphere of North-South relations was “changing” for the better after the visit last August of the Hyundai Chairman to Pyongyang and the release of the Hyundai employees. Also “all is smooth” at the Kaesong Industrial Complex and there has been a resumption of North-South Red Cross talks.

11. North Korea-Japan Relations: Potential for Improvement

A North Korean said that the delegation had heard in the La Jolla conference which preceded our meeting that the Japanese government is ready to have good relations with the DPRK if the DPRK takes positive steps. The North Korean inquired whether the DPRK needed to take the first steps or “will the Hatoyama government move first?”

12. Themes from the American Side

Among the points stressed by U.S. participants were that North Korea had blundered with its provocative actions in response to early private and public overtures by the Obama Administration and that no American Administration could have normal relations with a nuclear North Korea.

13. Regional Partners

There was a discussion on the postures of the other key countries. One American suggested that there was genuine internal debate in China about its policy toward North Korea (suggesting frustration with Pyongyang). Another said that the new government in Tokyo would be more receptive to some movement on the abduction issue than its predecessor, though this topic remained very important in terms of domestic politics. There was consensus on the improvement in North-South Korean relations and the marginal importance of Russia.

14. DPRK's Deep Sense of Insecurity

A U.S. observer who spent the entire week with the DPRK delegation both at the La Jolla conference and at the conference in New York observed that there was in the North Koreans “a sense of deep insecurity” that bubbled up periodically amid the bluster. In short, he said, “they looked scared.” They must, he said, realize that they are punching, or pretending to punch, above their weight and are genuinely concerned that they cannot keep the façade up indefinitely.

15. DPRK Seems Perplexed by Challenge and Opportunity Presented by Obama Administration

The same U.S. observer said that in private conversations with the North Koreans, they seemed genuinely perplexed by both the challenge and the opportunity presented by the Obama Administration and are under instructions to make sense of it all. With each of these Track II experiences, the U.S. observer said of the North Koreans, “the cognitive dissonance between their privileged existence and the sorry state of their country must be growing more acute.”