



Ilmin International Relations Institute

(Dec 11, 2009, Princeton University)

Denuclearizing North Korea: The Elusive Road

Han Sung-Joo

The U.S. special envoy to North Korea Steve Bosworth just recently visited Pyongyang and tried to win a “concession” from North Korea that promises they will return to the Six Party Talks in exchange for his (Bosworth’s) visit to the country. When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang last October and met with North Korean leader, Chairman Kim Jong-il, Kim presumably stated that North Korea would return to the Six-Party Talks only if certain conditions were met. One of the conditions was that the United States and North Korea would hold bilateral talks. The second related condition was that the North Koreans must deem the results of the talks to be satisfactory. Thus, this situation demonstrates that North Korea has successfully used its return to the Six Party talks as leverage to gain concessions. And they may continue to do so in the future.

North Korea was able to successfully increase the value of the Six-Party Talks and induce the other members of the Six-Party Talks to focus their diplomacy only on North Korea’s return to the table. The value of this bargaining chip has increased because other countries such as the United States and China have placed too much emphasis on the importance of the Six-Party Talks. They became too attached to the resumption of the talks.

As a result, this assessment has diverted attention away from the more crucial, real substances (contained within the Six-Party Talks) dealing with the denuclearization of North Korea, the possession and testing of nuclear weapons, non-proliferation and the application of effective sanctions.

Now that North Korea has succeeded in luring the members of the Six-Party Talks to



Ilmin International Relations Institute

chase after what I would call a “fake hare” or lure in a hound race (Six-Party Talks), it appears that there is very little possibility that North Korea will choose to put the “real hare” (denuclearization) on the table. Even if North Korea were to return to the Talks at this point, this would not necessarily mean that complete denuclearization of the country would be achieved. Additionally, even if North Korea were to return to the talks and reach a positive agreement, there is a good chance that Pyongyang will likely revert back to the vicious cycle of crisis – negotiations – agreement – benefits provided – delay in required reciprocal actions and finally the breaking of agreements. These previous negotiation tactics have succeeded quite well in giving North Korea the most benefits upfront, with little required in return.

South Korea and the United States have been discussing a “grand bargain” or the introduction of a “comprehensive package” to resolve the nuclear issue at one stroke, which aims to break this vicious cycle. The problem is that it is not certain whether North Korea will agree to such an arrangement or whether in the process of implementing the agreement, another vicious cycle of events will start all over again.

North Korea’s long-term strategic goal is to make its nuclear and long-range missile capabilities a *fait accompli* (determined fact) and to be recognized as such by using whatever means possible. From a mid-term perspective, one may assume that North Korea is trying to achieve goals in three different dimensions: internal politics, foreign policy, and its weapons regime system (hardware).

For domestic political purposes, North Korea wants to show off its nuclear and missile capabilities to emphasize that the Kim Jong-il regime is strong and that Chairman Kim is still very much in control of power. At the foreign policy level, North Korea wants to grab the attention of the U.S. and to gain and keep the upper hand in negotiations. At the weapons system level, North Korea, by conducting the latest daring missile launch, is trying to make up for the tests that failed in the past. The objective is to make its WMDs and delivery vehicles operational and complete. In short, the North Korean plan is to create a



Ilmin International Relations Institute

“powerful nation (*kangseong daeguk*) through the execution of its military-first policy (*seongun jeongchi*). This plan is well reflected in recent North Korea’s “work-harder campaign” to transform the country into a powerful and prosperous nation by 2012.

North Korea has consistently pursued this kind of strategy to become a nation that possesses nuclear weapons and advanced missile capabilities, taking many risks and having to make some great sacrifices along the way.

Although North Korea is now luring negotiating partners to the bargaining table, we should remember that North Korea has consistently resorted to brinkmanship tactics and “salami tactics,” or the slicing of bargaining trade-offs into thinner slices to gain more concessions, throughout our nuclear negotiations history.

If you recall, North Korea froze its nuclear facilities beginning in 2007 with the conclusion of the February 13 agreement and continued to engage in discussions about disablement for almost two years. It might be said that this phase was more or less a slight retreat but not complete abandonment of their goal to obtain nuclear weapons.

However, at some point, North Korea seems to have decided to start producing nuclear materials and building nuclear facilities again. Their determination to turn their nuclear and missile programs into a full-blown reality surfaced once again with North Korea’s rejection of the verification protocol in December 2008 followed by the launch of long-range and short-range rockets and the completion of their second nuclear test this year.

Before North Korea carried out this series of hostile actions, it is likely that Pyongyang fully anticipated the UN’s reaction to its nuclear device and ballistic missile tests. North Korea had almost certainly formulated a plan to use the UN’s sanction as an excuse to revive its nuclear activities. Because the first nuclear test in 2006 turned out to be a failure or only a partial success, North Korea determined that it needed to carry out additional nuclear



Ilmin International Relations Institute

tests. A country like North Korea needs at least six to twelve months to make the necessary preparations to conduct a nuclear test. Given the time needed to prepare for such a test, it seems certain that North Korea had already started pursuing the objective of perfecting their nuclear technology capabilities.

From a military perspective, it is most likely that North Korea wants to develop the ability to attack the United States. By weaponizing its warheads and possessing the capability to fire a missile directly over U.S. territory, North Korea aims to become a nuclear threat vis-à-vis the United States. North Korea hopes that its bargaining position will be strengthened by perfecting its nuclear weapons technology. North Korea thinks this will not only help it earn recognition as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state but it will also turn the negotiations on denuclearization into arms control negotiations. In short, North Korea's strategy all along has been to become a nation that possesses nuclear weapons. It appears that giving up its nuclear weapons program is not an option for North Korea.

Now that North Korea has restarted its nuclear weapons program in earnest, including the uranium enrichment program, it can afford to discuss the resumption of negotiations. But, even if the negotiations were to take place, North Korea would not want the talks to end up emulating the Libyan model of "reciprocal unilateral measures."

Indeed, neither the Libyan solution, war in Iraq, nor the situation in Iran has been helpful in dealing with the North Korean issue. The Libyan deal encouraged the United States to seek a similar deal with North Korea in the name of CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement). However, Libya's example only made North Korea even more determined not to do what Libya had done, to give up its nuclear program and material completely.

And although the war in Iraq initially must have made North Korea flinch, it also had an undesired effect on North Korea. The lesson it learned was that the United States attacked Iraq, not because it had nuclear weapons, but because it did not have them. It must have



Ilmin International Relations Institute

made North Korea even more determined to secure nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, the U.S. preoccupation with Iraq since 2003 presented the Kim Jong-il regime with a good opportunity to focus on developing and manufacturing nuclear weapons without the fear of the U.S. diverting its military power and attention to North Korea. Another factor which prevented the United States from exercising coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea was the South Korean dispatch of troops to Iraq.

Even though the United States rejected any direct link between the South Korean troop dispatch to Iraq and U.S. policy toward North Korea, it was inevitable that the United States would give much consideration to the Roh Mu Hyun administration's concern about the U.S. placing excessive pressure on North Korea. Furthermore, as the U. S. credibility regarding intelligence information on Iraq's nuclear program became seriously damaged, it also lost credibility with regards to gathering intelligence information on North Korea.

Iran is a mixed blessing for dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. On the one hand, the United States recognizes that if it cannot stop North Korea, it will be even more difficult to stop Iran as it is certainly watching closely how the United States deals with North Korea. On the other hand, the U.S. regards the Iranian problem to be more serious than the one that North Korea presents.

During my term as ambassador to the United States, I attended a few summit meetings in which the U.S. president unequivocally stated that the U.S. regarded Iran as a more serious problem than North Korea. I suppose the reason is Iran's proximity to Israel, oilfields, terrorists and their activities. It is not a very comforting thought that the United States does not regard North Korean nuclear weapons to be of the highest priority of concern.

In the meantime, the Obama administration made a strong claim that it will not "buy the same horse twice" meaning it will not renegotiate on nuclear freeze and ultimate dismantlement and that it will not reward bad behavior (such as nuclear test).

Instead, the U.S. is reviewing whether it should make a grand bargain or offer a comprehensive package in return for North Korea's denuclearization. This was a position



Ilmin International Relations Institute

held by the past George W Bush administration until 2006. However, the Bush administration wound up reaching an agreement with North Korea, postponing the fundamental resolution of the problem under the pretext that it could buy the horse if it was *new* and that it could reward good behavior. North Korea, after reaching an agreement, resorted to its salami tactics of slicing the agreement into smaller “action-to-action” and “word-to-word” pieces while back-loading important measures to avoid making substantive steps towards denuclearization. It is unclear whether the Obama administration will be able to deal effectively with North Korea’s skillful negotiation techniques.

From China’s perspective, not only is denuclearization of North Korea important but the continued existence of the North Korean regime and maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula are also important strategic goals. At this stage China probably believes that a hard-line policy that manages to corner North Korea is not an appropriate strategic alternative. Therefore, China sees the best solution as continuing to pursue the Six Party Talks to maintain its influence. Thus, China is most likely trying to exert as much influence on North Korea as possible while trying to restrain North Korea’s nuclear weapons development. China is also closely observing the internal situation of North Korea, including the long-term situational changes.

By using a type of divide and conquer strategy that targets each individual nation, North Korea has been approaching not only China, but also the United States and South Korea by sometimes using intransigent stance, and sometimes employing charm offensive. As a result, this has created much confusion and division among the other Six Party members. It is argued that the lack of consensus among the five nations over how to approach to the North Korean problem has been ascribed to the failure of finding a solution at the Six-Party Talks.

As far as South Korea is concerned, it needs to show that it can distinguish between the real and the fake hare in the process of persuading the surrounding countries about the importance of striking the so-called “grand bargain.”



Ilmin International Relations Institute

A critical problem is a significant degree of fatigue over managing the North Korea problem. Clearly, dealing with the repeated cycle of “crisis-negotiations-agreement-breakdown,” creates a lot of fatigue. However, the nuclear issue is such a critical issue that we cannot be complacent and let it get any worse. We should maintain our keen interest in this issue no matter how exhausted we are.

Thus, the emphasis should be placed on managing the North Korean nuclear activity for the time being, by preventing the expansion of its nuclear arsenal. At the same time, we should also enhance our capacities to think and act strategically to come up with a political and international situation in which North Korea will find it both necessary and feasible to engage in a genuine discussion of denuclearization. It will be a situation in which carrots and sticks are mixed in an appropriate, judicious and balanced way. Such a response will require close cooperation and coordination among the rest (other than North Korea) of the Six Party Talks.

The stepped-up strategic dialogues among particularly China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and the United States, both bilateral and multilateral, are not only conducive to ensuring leaders of concerned parties to address immediate North Korean challenges. It will also provide a forum for discussing cross-cutting and conflicting approaches to a solution, and it will also exert a constructive, far-reaching impact on regional stability and security. ***