

Building a Solid Partnership: Trilateral Policy Coordination on Pyongyang

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RHETORICAL BATTLES BETWEEN PYONGYANG AND THE U.S.

Policy coordination between Seoul, Washington and Tokyo is once again a matter of primary concern following North Korea's alleged admission to U.S. Presidential Special Envoy James Kelly, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, of its clandestine program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. Despite divergent views on the current status of the North Korean nuclear program, the U.S., South Korea and Japan agree that the North has violated numerous agreements, including the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguard Agreement, and the Inter-Korean Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. At the 10th Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Mexico on October 27, 2002, leaders of all three nations reaffirmed their positions on the nuclear issue, and urged North Korea to give up its nuclear program in a swift and verifiable manner and to fully observe all international guidelines as it

promised in the Joint Declaration with Japan in Pyongyang last September.¹⁾

With the emergence of the North Korean nuclear crisis, the trilateral policy cooperation has recently come to the fore again. Given the stronger U.S. position on non-proliferation since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington took a dim view of the North Korean nuclear revelations. The news was also an unwelcome surprise to Japan, which had already agreed to normalization talks with North Korea. Seoul is also concerned about the negative impact of the current nuclear standoff between the U.S. and North Korea on future inter-Korean relations. While emphasizing the need for a peaceful settlement of the current nuclear crisis, the South Korean government took a strong position at the eighth inter-Korean ministerial-level talks (October 19-22), stating that it would seek to every channel available to solve the North Korea nuclear problem.²⁾ The comparatively strong stance of the South Korean government can also be explained by recent changes in North Korean policy. Despite its war of words against the U.S., North Korea has appeared to be positive toward inter-Korean economic cooperation.

Since North Korea's alleged admission of a highly enriched uranium nuclear program, we have seen a series of confrontations between the two sides, with South Korea, U.S. and Japan as one axis, and North Korea as the other. The Bush administration has urged North Korea to give up its nuclear program in a "prompt and verifiable" manner, and President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice have joined in urging a peaceful, diplomatic solution rather than a military one to the nuclear problem. On October 25, North Korea responded that the U.S. itself had violated the Agreed Framework, and that it would

1) *The Associated Press*, "U.S., Japan, South Korea demand that North Korea abandon nuclear program in 'prompt and verifiable manner,'" October 27, 2002.

2) *The Korea Times*, "ROK Builds Strong Case for Dialog-First Approach," October 23, 2002.

only consider negotiation if a non-aggression pact between Washington and Pyongyang were part of the agenda. Reaffirming its previous position that North Korea must come clean before the start of negotiations,³⁾ Washington reiterated on October 29 that North Korea would have to give up its nuclear program, regardless of its recent reconciliatory maneuvers with Japan and South Korea.

In any case, normalization efforts between North Korea and Japan had failed after Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi stated on October 25 that talks with North Korea could not continue without the resolution of issues surrounding North Korea's nuclear program and the abduction of Japanese citizens. South Korean officials also urged that they are against any kind of nuclear development in the North, and that North Korea should provide concrete assurance and a future timeline to the international community to stave off the current nuclear crisis.⁴⁾

The joint declaration at a Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting in Tokyo was a clear indication of the wishes of all three countries that the North should give up its nuclear plan in a swift and verifiable manner (November 9, 2003).⁵⁾ Warning that future shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea would fully depend on the follow-up measures taken by North Korea, the executive committee of Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in New York (November 14) urged the immediate abolition of the North Korean nuclear program and hinted at the suspension of several KEDO activities, including the construction of light-water reactors.⁶⁾ Welcoming that response from

3) *(North) Korean Central News Agency*, October 25, 2002.

4) Official notice on the homepage of Ministry of Unification on November 1 [<http://www.unikorea.go.kr>].

5) Delegations to the TCOG talks are James Kelly, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia-Pacific Affairs, South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Tai-sik and Hitoshi Tanaka, Japanese director general for Asia-Pacific affairs.

6) *The Joongang Daily*, "Future Oil to North Held Uncertain," November 14, 2002.

KEDO, President Bush stated that U.S. had no intention to invade North Korea.⁷⁾

Angered by U.S. criticism, as well as by failure in normalization talks with Japan, North Korea threatened that it might reconsider the postponement of a missile launch (November 5). It also refused KEDO officials entry into the North to inspect delivered heavy fuel oil (November 19). Referring to the Bush's statement that "U.S. has no intention to invade North Korea," it again insisted on the need for a non-aggression pact with Washington in order to protect its sovereignty. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell responded that his country would consider the matter once North Korea gave up its nuclear program (November 18). And in response to the claim by North Korea's First Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Suk-joo that the U.S., not North Korea, had nullified the Agreed Framework, James Kelly argued that "the U.S. had not officially nullified it" (November 20).⁸⁾

Through a variety of channels such as declarations, news conferences, statements and briefings, more rhetorical battles will continue in 2003. While the U.S. exerts diplomatic pressure against the North Korean regime, North Korea insists on a non-aggression pact with the U.S. so as to legitimize its own position on nuclear matters. Historically, the North has consistently argued that the nuclear problem should be resolved directly between U.S. and North Korea, not multilaterally. In other words, it wishes to exclude Japan, China, and Russia, not to mention South Korea.

On one hand, the North argues that the two Koreas should focus on the national agenda and avoid being swayed by the international agenda led by the U.S. At the same time, it seems to be trying to alienate relations between the U.S. and South Korea. That dual

7) *The Associated Press*, "Bush Seeks to End N. Korea Shipments," November 15, 2002.

8) *The Korea Times*, "US Has Not Annulled Agreed Framework, Kelly Says," November 20, 2002.

approach to South Korea has also been evidenced by the abrupt postponement of military talks between two Koreas for no apparent reason, yet it projects a surprisingly positive attitude on the expansion of inter-Korean economic ties such the legislation on Mt. Kumkang Special Tourist Zone and on Kaesong Special Economic Zone.

U.S. NORTH KOREA POLICY UNDER THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

The Republicans have been critical of the Clinton administration's policy toward North Korea, viewing that there were no significant changes in the North's hostile stance and that it may still be planning to develop nuclear weapons in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. On several occasions, President Bush has explicitly expressed his skepticism about the North Korean regime. Secretary of State Colin Powell described North Korean leader Kim Jong-il as a "despot," and he regards North Korea as a threat with its huge army, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missiles. The U.S. has also emphasized that any negotiations with North Korea would require complete verification of the terms of a potential agreement and must be based upon political "realism." In other words, the Bush administration regards North Korea as a country that cannot be trusted, and believes that U.S. policy toward North Korea should be prudent and determined.

On June 6, 2001, President Bush announced that the U.S. would resume talks with North Korea on completion of his administration's review of North Korea policy. He said that the U.S. would have "serious discussions" on a "broad agenda" in the context of a comprehensive approach. The agenda includes improved implementation of the Agreed Framework relating to North Korea's nuclear activities; verifiable constraints on North Korea's missile

programs, a ban on its missile exports and a less threatening conventional military posture.

As the Perry report espoused, President Bush's top priority in framing a comprehensive approach is how to end North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile-related activities. Along with these issues, he added North Korea's conventional deployments near the DMZ as a new agenda. President Bush's initiative was welcome news to South Korea, and it gave the Kim Dae-jung administration a good reason for pressing efforts to get inter-Korean relations back onto its track. Public support for his Sunshine Policy toward North Korea suffered some decline as North Korea did not carry out some of the agreed-on measures at the four-rounds of ministerial talks. For North Korea, on the other hand, President Bush's announcement to resume talks was perceived as "conditional" and lacking the genuine intention to start talks.

Unlike the Clinton administration's approach which offered some carrots first in order to encourage North Korea to come forward, the Bush administration's approach requires North Korea to behave first before the U.S. "expands its efforts to help the North Korean people, ease sanctions and take other political steps." President Bush emphasized that North Korea is to "demonstrate the seriousness of its desire for improved relations" by responding affirmatively and taking appropriate action.⁹⁾ In other words, if North Korea's stance remains consistent, no serious discussions cannot be expected.

As we can infer from President Bush's ambitious plan to set up a missile defense (MD) system, the primary purpose of the U.S. policy toward North Korea is to prevent the proliferation of WMD and missiles which deliver the WMDs. In the minds of President Bush's

9) *New York Times*, "US Will Restart Wide Negotiations with North Korea," June 7, 2001; *The Washington Post*, "US Will Resume Talks with North Korea," June 7, 2001.

diplomatic and security teams, North Korea is one reason for their pursuit of the MD. As assistant Secretary James A. Kelly stated on June 12, 2001 before the House Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, North Korea policy has been consistent with being supportive of and consonant with North-South *rapprochement*, but the United States seems aimed at resolving the North's missiles and WMD issue before anything else. In this sense, the Bush administration's agenda on North Korea is not as broad as they claim. even though it includes North Korea's conventional deployments. Three issues the Bush administration wants to address vis-à-vis North Korea are all security-related ones. Moreover, it sets "effective verification" as "a prerequisite for any agreements with North Korea."

Of course, those issues must be resolved in one way or another to establish a stable peace system on the Korean peninsula. But when it comes to finding ways to further encourage North Korea to become a reasonable actor in international society, it would be better make an appropriate assessment of its recent efforts to adapt itself to changing internal and external conditions. As John McLaughlin, Deputy Director of the U.S. CIA, put it, North Korea has shown some flexibility, which may be tactical but still encouraging. How could one expect all-out policy changes, not to mention system transformation, in the short term in a nation where "Kim Il-sung is thought to be a God and his son, Kim Jong-il, 70 percent of God?" Placing disproportionate emphasis on North Korea's threat on the basis of WMDs, and missile programs and conventional weapons deployments could discourage Pyongyang's recent efforts to adapt the North Korean economy to the changing international environment.¹⁰⁾

After thousands of Americans died on U.S. soil as a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration further

10) *The Reuters*, "CIA Official: N. Korea Probably has Nuclear Arms," April 18, 2001.

tightened its policy toward North Korea, suspecting it of having connections with international terrorism. In fact, it framed its new defense planning based on a “capability-based” model that focuses on how an adversary might fight.¹¹⁾

This led President Bush, in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, to identify North Korea as a member of an “axis of evil.” By classifying North Korea as such, he “did more than decry Pyongyang’s deliberate sacrifice of millions of its own citizens to starvation and death while feeding its military programs.”¹²⁾

Although President Bush made it clear he would engage in dialogue with North Korea at the press conference following the summit meeting with President Kim Dae-jung on February 20, 2002, the Bush administration’s first and foremost objective vis-à-vis North Korea is to shackle its WMD and missile programs. And while the U.S. supports President Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy of engagement, as President Bush reiterated in Seoul, they have no intention of giving North Korea any incentives to bring it back to the negotiation table.

STARTING POINT OF TRILATERAL POLICY COORDINATION

Seoul, Washington and Tokyo, all three of which were founded on principles of liberal democracy and market economy, have long been linked by two security alliances—between South Korea and the U.S. and Japan and the U.S. Thus, it can be said that the starting point for a three-way policy coordination on North Korea should be based on shared fundamental values and the common perception of

11) Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001.

12) John J. Tkacik and Balbina Hwang, “President Bush’s Trip to Asia: Promoting Security, Prosperity, and Peace,” *Backgrounder*, No. 1517 (February 12, 2002), p. 1.

security issues. Both the U.S. and South Korea, allies for over a half century, have cooperated to deter military threats from North Korea. During the Cold War, South Korea functioned as a bulwark of democracy against the expansion of communism. As the key U.S. strategy in the East Asia Region, the South Korea-U.S. alliance has also been strongly linked to U.S.-Japan security cooperation. As for Japan, it developed an economically powerful country within the Washington-Tokyo security framework. That is, military stability on the Korean peninsula was regarded as a precondition for the security of Japan. The U.S. also believed that it could benefit by promoting better relations with Japan and South Korea, respectively. In sum, it can be said that the three nations have been in general agreement on the importance of strengthened mutual cooperation in all areas.

In the post-Cold War era when North Korea attempted to develop its own nuclear weapons, the U.S. saw North Korea as a challenge to its global strategy. As a result, it began direct negotiations with Pyongyang. Those coordinated efforts between the U.S. and South Korea, and among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan, have been regarded as one of the key variables in its policy-making process toward North Korea. Three-way policy coordination has not been limited to the North Korean nuclear issue, but to other areas such as policy reviews on aid to the North. Nonetheless, the key focus has been on security concerns surrounding North Korea. For example, a trilateral policy coordination has been coordinated in the alleged development of plutonium-based nuclear weapons, its economic instability, missiles, as well as the recent uranium enrichment program. In fact, KEDO is the outcome of trilateral policy coordination for the implementation of the Agreed Framework, and most recently, the three nations have been operating within the framework of TCOG.

Worth noting, trilateral policy coordination has focused mostly on providing the solution to the conflicts between the U.S. and North Korea. Since the Clinton administration, North Korea has ensured its survival by taking advantage of its relations with South Korea and

the U.S. In dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue, the Clinton administration adopted a tolerance policy toward North Korea to avert instability on the Korean peninsula. Thus, bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea emerged as a new variable to South Korea in its own policy making toward North Korea. That is, South Korean authorities had to pay more attention to North Korean activities, and it also had to take into account the North variable in its relations with U.S. As for Japan, it has generally acted in concert with the U.S. and South Korea to promote its own territorial security.

SAME BED, DIFFERENT DREAMS

Although the three nations have shared goals and interests, a variety of differences exist as well, even in the half-century alliance between Washington and Seoul. These are mainly due to different national interests, policy concerns, strategic considerations, and policy priorities of each nation, which are outlined below.

First, there are somewhat different perceptions toward the North Korean regime itself. President Bush and his advisors harbor mistrust of the North Korean leader. A case in point, the President said on November 19 that Kim Jong-il must drastically change his policy in favor of individual freedom.¹³⁾ One apparent difference from the Iraqi situation, U.S. might not be willing to carry out a preemptive attack against North Korea.

In contrast, South Korea believes that the North has been trying to take a more practical policy for its system's stability and economic recovery. Given the inflexible characteristics of the Pyongyang regime itself, South Korea believes that recent efforts by the North could be understood as meaningful changes, even though they fall short of fundamental reforms such as system change or the

13) *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2001.

introduction of a market economy. In fact, South Korean authorities see the North Korean regime as a partner, necessary to improve inter-Korean relations. For them, Pyongyang's recent insistence on North Korea-U.S. non-aggression pact originated from its real worries about its stability, mainly caused by the recent U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁾

And while Japan is in favor of practical changes in North Korea, it has shown signs of worry, along with the U.S. posture in matters of WMD and missile launches. Since North Korea test-fired its Daepodong-I missile across Japan in 1998, Japan has regarded North Korean WMDs and its missile tests as a direct threat. Basically, Japan shares views with the U.S. on North Korean nuclear weapons programs and missiles. Besides, when the North vowed to abide by international commitments on nuclear development projects, Japan evaluated its efforts as a pragmatic move and held summit talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il on September 17, 2002. The thaw did not last long, because the North Korean clandestine uranium enrichment project was revealed.

Secondly, different approaches to North Korea should be considered. While addressing several issues such as the implementation of the Geneva agreement, a verifiable control of missiles, economic sanctions, further economic aid to the North, and other political measures, the Bush administration explored whether the North was willing to change its policy, especially in matters of WMD, Missile, and conventional weapons. Furthermore, the U.S. has insisted that the North comply before material compensation would be considered. Currently, North Korea has not shown any positive efforts. The U.S. government, however, will take any means necessary, including diplomatic pressure, strong economic sanctions, and search and seizure of North Korean vessels in international

14) *Donga Ilbo*, "An interview with Unification Minister Jung Se-hyun," November 27, 2002.

waters.

By contrast, South Korea has paid more attention to the resumption of inter-Korean relations, especially by extending various forms of aid to North Korea, and also through the revitalization of a variety of exchange and cooperation programs. South Korean officials believe that North Korea will come to trust them more in the process of aiding the economic recovery of the North, and that the North will finally give up its military designs. While South Korea is in general agreement with the U.S. and Japan as evidenced by its firm insistence that the North give up its nuclear program, it believes that military tension could be lessened through positive inter-Korean economic relations.

Japan, for its part, has sided with the U.S. on the North Korean nuclear crisis, while taking a drastic approach to other matters. Particularly, the issue of Japanese abductees kidnapped by the North is one of Japan's highest priorities along with the North Korean missile test moratorium. During its normalization talks with North Korea, Japan had continuously requested the resolution of the issue. Even though North Korea admitted to the kidnapping and allowed their return as a goodwill gesture after the Japan-North Korea summit, the issue over remaining abductees and Japanese public's protest against the North will hinder further Japan-North Korea negotiations.

Thirdly, various policy priorities exist. South Korea seems to focus more on economic issues such as the connection of inter-Korean railways and roads, revitalization of the Mt. Kumgang tourism project, and the construction of the Kaesong industrial complex. The recent meeting between military personnel of the two Koreas can be seen as South Korean efforts to use economic cooperation as a base for the inter-Korean confidence-building. Although the South Korean government points out the need to solve the military problems such as WMD and missiles, it doesn't seem to regard them as a top-priority issue. By contrast, the U.S. government

has prioritized those issues, as well as the observance of the Agreed Framework. Regarding North Korea's missile capability as a threat to the security in East Asia region, and to U.S interests, the U.S. believes that no peace and security on the Korean peninsula is possible without solving those military issues. It also points out the human rights violation in North Korea.

As for Japan, the priority concern lies in the abduction of its civilians, and the WMDs and missile capabilities of North Korea. Therefore, the Japanese government is trying to solve those problems by taking advantage of its economic leverage--financial compensation for Japan's colonial rule and economic aid. North Korea has wanted improved ties with Japan in the hopes that Tokyo would provide money to the country if formal relations are forged, as it did to South Korea in 1965 compensation for Japan's colonial rule. Pyongyang's compensation claim is expected to reach 10 billion dollars.

THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF TRILATERAL POLICY COORDINATION

Despite a variety of differences between Seoul, Washington and Tokyo, all three nations must come up with a common denominator to solve the current North Korean crisis. For the more effective use of such a three-way policy coordination system, all must agree that trilateral policy coordination is a necessary condition for the improved bilateral relations vis-à-vis North Korea. In this context, they must take a more consistent policy toward issues like WMD and missile capabilities of North Korea. Trilateral policy coordination should start from the acknowledgment that each nation might have a different perception, dependent upon its own national interests, or policy priorities, but they should do their utmost to come up with a wide range of common denominators, especially in dealing with the

North Korean problems. Then, they need to develop a policy roadmap with North Korea, including goals, strategies, specific tasks and practical measures.

For the U.S., one of the basic rationales for supporting South Korea has been the geo-strategic importance of the Korean peninsula. It is true that North Korea's large conventional forces still pose a threat to U.S. Forces Korea as well as to South Korea, and it is also a major threat to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. As the close policy coordination between the U.S. and South Korea led to the opportunity to end the Cold War on the Korean peninsula, it will continue to be the basic pillar in implementing the comprehensive approach. First, the South Korean government believes that reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea may lead to tension reduction on the Korean peninsula. Stressing that North Korea's nuclear and missile issues are as important to South Korea as they are to the United States, it also wants to establish a peace regime through dialogue and negotiations.

But, North Korea has maintained, and will continue to maintain, that security matters concern North Korea and the United States. For the U.S., the North's nuclear and missile programs must be dealt with immediately. In this context, role-sharing between the U.S. and South Korea would be a more effective way to implement the comprehensive approach. While the U.S. would play a leading role in tackling the North's nuclear and missile issues, South Korea would play a supporting role. When South Korea and the U.S. consider their respective roles in other areas, it is important to remember that each nation has its own capabilities and agenda priorities. Above all, the U.S. should treat South Korea as an equal partner.

To sum up, the existing trilateral coordination must be reviewed, since more conflicts are expected to arise between U.S. hard-line policy and the South Korean policy based on exchange and cooperation. Stable and consistent South-North relations cannot

develop without solving such issues, and since conflicting ideas among the three nations are based on their different national interests, it might be wise to readjust those interests to the changed milieu surrounding North Korea.