

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

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## The North Korea Nuclear Crisis: Five Guiding Principles

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North Korea's nuclear weapons program has posed a clear danger to peace and stability in East Asia for the past two decades. North Korea's recent acts, including its July 2006 missile tests, October 2006 and May 2009 nuclear tests, and April 2009 "satellite launch," coupled with its insistence that it would never return to the Six-Party Talks, clearly demonstrate that circumstances have now devolved into a crisis.

The current North Korea nuclear crisis is significantly more serious than that which occurred in 1994. Not only is North Korea's nuclear program now far more advanced, its two nuclear tests represent clear violations of its past commitments to denuclearize. There is a narrow—and rapidly closing—window of opportunity in which the international community has a chance to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear state. Beyond the obvious harmful effect that a nuclear-armed North Korea would have on regional stability, the international community's failure to stop its nuclear program would also deal a significant blow to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and potentially encourage other states to follow North Korea's example. The damage would

be particularly pronounced in the wake of US President Barack Obama's celebrated speech in Prague this past April in which he called for "a world without nuclear weapons."

Furthermore, persistent media reports of Kim Jong-il's health problems, as well as domestic political issues related to the transfer of power to Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's third son and rumored successor, have added an additional dimension to the threat posed by North Korea and significantly exacerbated long-existing concerns about regime stability. A transfer of power to a new leader could be a positive development and create an opportunity for a fundamental reversal in Pyongyang's nuclear policy, or it could have a negative impact if the new regime seeks to consolidate support within the North Korean military through the pursuit of an even more hard-line and confrontational policy. The unfortunate reality is that it is simply too early to determine what impact regime change will have on the nuclear issue and whether it will result in changes in the manner of North Korea's interactions with the international community.

## Guiding Principles for Addressing the North Korea Nuclear Issue

North Korea must never be recognized as a nuclear state

The international community must not treat North Korea's self-proclaimed status as a nuclear power as a *fait accompli* by recognizing Pyongyang as a nuclear state. Doing so would seriously undermine the credibility of the United Nations Security Council, the NPT, and the Six-Party Talks.

Some observers have suggested that in the wake of North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, the focus of US policy has shifted away from denuclearization toward counter-proliferation. In other words, rather than aiming to end North Korea's nuclear program once and for all, they argue that the United States is now merely seeking to prevent Pyongyang from selling nuclear technology to third parties. Any such perceived shift in US policy will inevitably give rise to debates in Japan about the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence, a development that could potentially have a destabilizing effect on the security environment in East Asia.

The Obama administration must continue to make unambiguous statements denying these rumors and unequivocally state to both Pyongyang and the international community that the United States will never recognize North Korea as a nuclear state. The joint statement released during the recent summit in Washington between President Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak is a fine example of what is necessary.

Policy consistency among and within the five nations is essential

The absence of a united front and policy consistency among the five parties has created an environment of indecisiveness, allowing the North Korean regime to effectively exploit policy differences and play governments off one another to great effect. The five parties must learn from experience. The past six years have clearly demonstrated that disparate policies between different administrations within the United States, Japan, and South Korea and the lack

of a policy consistency among the five nations have seriously weakened denuclearization efforts.

Henceforth, more extensive collaboration—as well as greater cohesion and consistency in policy—among the states involved will be absolutely essential. Faithful adherence to UN Security Council Resolutions 1518 and 1874 by the five parties—in particular China and Russia—will also be crucial. Tensions may deepen among the five nations as North Korea openly challenges the Security Council's demands. However, it is imperative that the UN resolutions be implemented effectively, particularly as they concern interception of North Korean ships suspected of carrying banned weapons and technology. In the event of another North Korean provocation, the five nations will need to demonstrate a united front by holding a high-level five-party dialogue (to which North Korea would not be invited).

Contingency planning is imperative

Given that North Korea sees everything through the mirror of power and incessantly threatens military responses to various “acts of war” allegedly committed against it by the international community, the five parties must always be prepared for the possibility of open conflict. It is imperative that trilateral contingency planning—not only concerning military tactics but also with regard to evacuating noncombatants and responding to a possible refugee crisis—be carried out in an earnest and discreet manner among Japan, the United States, and South Korea. During the 1994 nuclear crisis, efforts to engage in trilateral planning failed to get off the ground. Instead, discussions were held bilaterally between the United States and its alliance partners. This time, trilateral contingency planning, coupled with regular consultations with China and Russia concerning these plans, will be essential.

A comprehensive, negotiated settlement is the only practical way forward

In order to make a negotiated settlement possible, the five parties must demonstrate a willingness to present a united front and assertively counter any provocations by North Korea. At the same time, the

five parties must also show that they are willing to reach a comprehensive settlement that will address North Korea's concerns. In exchange for verifiable denuclearization and a clear commitment from North Korea to seriously reform the manner of its interactions with the outside world, the five parties must hold out a number of carrots, most importantly 1) normalization of relations between North Korea and the United States and Japan and 2) the establishment of a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

The Six-Party process must continue with informal negotiations before the talks resume. It is unrealistic to expect that North Korea will abruptly decide to come back to the negotiating table and resume the Six-Party Talks. Rather, informal dialogue will be necessary in order to lay the groundwork for meaningful negotiations. To this end, when circumstances are appropriate for dialogue, the United States should engage in a series of bilateral talks with North Korea concerning its nuclear development and the process of normalizing bilateral diplomatic relations. Negotiations between North and South Korea must also be restarted. For its part, Japan needs to be prepared to negotiate toward diplomatic normalization based upon the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration. As far as the abductees issue is concerned, the two sides will have to establish

a fair and verifiable process to determine the truth about those Japanese citizens still unaccounted for by Pyongyang. Parallel dialogue on these issues conducted under the umbrella of the Six-Party Talks is the only realistic way to achieve a comprehensive settlement.

In order to have any hope of success, these informal talks must be convened at a sufficiently high level with the full and complete backing of each nation's top leadership.



North Korea's recent actions represent egregious violations of its past commitments to abandon its nuclear weapons program and have raised doubts about whether its leaders have any intention of coming back to the table to negotiate in good faith. To ensure a soft landing, the five parties must adhere to the guiding principles delineated above as they go forward. Simply put, the international community cannot afford to fail in its dealings with North Korea and needs to adopt a well thought-out joint approach.

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## *East Asia Insights*

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