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Five Myths about Dealing with North Korea: A Japanese Perspective

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The past year has witnessed North Korea conduct a series of missile tests (July) in addition to its first-ever nuclear weapons test (October). UN Security Council Resolution 1718 used the body's strongest censure of North Korea since 1953 to unanimously condemn the DPRK nuclear test and authorize economic and commercial sanctions against the regime. This was followed two months later by a resumption of the Six-Party Talks and mid-January bilateral discussions between the United States and North Korea in Berlin, two developments that effectively paved the way for the most recent phase of talks in Beijing and the subsequent release of the Six-Party Joint Statement on February 13.

Almost by definition, the road to a final resolution of the North Korea issue is one fraught with many challenges. No simple or piecemeal solution can realistically be expected to achieve success. And, when one examines the gravity of the situation, failure, frankly speaking, is utterly unacceptable. The outcome of this effort, positive or negative, will have serious consequences for East Asian security, a region of increasing importance in the post-Cold War era. A breakdown in progress would have a significant and lasting impact upon the Nonproliferation Treaty framework, a regime

already teetering on the verge of collapse. Whether or not a soft landing is truly possible will have long-term implications for determining the role global governance has to play in handling future international challenges.

With the complications surrounding the Banco Delta Asia issue, even the fate of measures stipulated in the February agreement remains uncertain. Given the long road ahead, it is worthwhile at this juncture to consider the validity of the following oft-heard critiques of the February Joint Statement.

MYTH 1:

"The February Joint Statement is merely a rehash of the 1994 Agreed Framework."

In a word: no. The 1994 Agreed Framework was a result of bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea and ultimately collapsed due to the lack of a tight monitoring mechanism. Thirteen years ago, US policymakers assumed that once an agreement was reached on the issue, both sides would act in good faith and fulfill their respective commitments. That proved to be a miscalculation, and the world now knows it is a mistake to have blind faith in any agreement with North Korea.

The February 13 agreement was achieved within the framework of the Six-Party Talks and, to put it simply, although North Korea will continue to play hardball and engage in brinkmanship for as long as it can, its leadership is well aware that it cannot afford to go back on its word this time. The Bush administration has made serious and domestically controversial concessions, and there would be a severe backlash if North Korea were to sabotage the agreement.

In addition to its mechanism for verifying progress, the agreement is more comprehensive in nature than its predecessor, including the establishment of five working groups to deal with issues of both bilateral and regional concern and a commitment by all parties to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula through a separate forum. In short, while not a solution in and of itself, the February agreement remains a significant step in the right direction.

MYTH 2:

“North Korea will never live up to its end of the bargain.”

It cannot be denied that the North Korean leadership is far from an ideal negotiating partner and has at times failed to faithfully abide by its agreements in the past. In order to ensure that this does not happen again, decision makers in the five nations involved must be sure to not repeat past mistakes.

While it goes without saying that full blame for the problem lies squarely on North Korea's shoulders, the absence thus far of consistent policy and a united front among the five parties to the talks has created an environment of indecisiveness, allowing the North Korean regime to play other governments off one another to great effect. Above all else, greater collaboration among the states involved and cohesion and consistency in policy will be absolutely crucial henceforth. If the five parties post a united front, North Korea will have no choice but to honor its commitments. The very survival of its regime will depend on it.

MYTH 3:

“Kim Jong-Il is a totally irrational leader.”

The North Korean leadership is arguably the most secretive in the world, and it is often difficult to understand the thought process driving its decision making. Based on past behavior, however, we can reasonably assume that there are two primary forces driving its actions. The first is that the fundamental goal of the leadership is to preserve the regime through the development of nuclear weapons and missile technology that is sufficiently advanced to deter an American military strike. The second is the belief that without economic reforms, the regime will collapse from within. In the pursuit of these reforms, leaders have had no choice but to depend on the outside world and gradually begin a shift toward a more capitalist economic system. Putting moral judgment aside, if one acknowledges that the leadership places regime survival above all else, it is not overwhelmingly difficult to understand why the regime behaves as it does. Simply put, North Korea has sought nuclear weapons and advanced missile technology for the same reason that India and Pakistan did: as a deterrent against hostile action from what it perceives as belligerent outside forces.

Even if many of the policy decisions the North Korean leadership has made heretofore can be deemed “rational,” if the situation were to escalate at some point in the future and the regime believed its continued existence to be in imminent danger, it is not outside the realm of possibility that panic might trump rationality. There are a number of prominent policymakers who ardently believe in “rational deterrence theory,” i.e. the philosophy that as long as North Korea only has a few nuclear weapons there is no chance that it would actually use one because doing so would result in a devastating US retaliatory strike. While this theory may have held true thus far in the postwar era, it is dangerous to assume its infallibility when the state in question is an international pariah like North Korea.

The conventional wisdom of rational deterrence theory suggests that as long as North Korea does not hand over weapons to terrorist groups, it does not pose a substantial threat to regional or

global stability. If one looks at the North Korean nuclear question from this perspective, the main goal of negotiations at this stage seems to be oriented toward ensuring nonproliferation, as opposed to guaranteed denuclearization of the peninsula. The growing influence of this mindset is reflected in the February agreement's call for North Korea to merely "disable," as opposed to "irreversibly dismantle," its nuclear weapons and weapons programs. As the country most likely to be the target of a North Korean attack, Japan cannot accept such a policy and cannot afford to allow even a single weapon to remain in North Korean hands.

MYTH 4:

"Japan's continuing insistence on a resolution of the abductees issue is sabotaging the entire process."

In February, the Japanese government opted out of involvement in the initial 50,000 ton shipment of heavy oil. This decision has led some observers to ask why Japan has chosen to isolate itself by insisting on a resolution of the abductees issue as a prerequisite for greater involvement in negotiations. This was followed by the Japan-DPRK working group meeting in early March, which ended abruptly after the North Korean delegation stormed out prematurely, scoffing at Japanese demands for a resolution to the abductees issue and insisting that it had already been solved.

Many non-Japanese cannot comprehend why Japan insists on making such a big issue over abductees, particularly in the context of the threat posed by a North Korean nuclear weapon with the potential to kill hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens. There are two main reasons for this stance. First, as stated above, resolution of the nuclear issue can only realistically be achieved in the context of a comprehensive solution. The shock of the October nuclear test has distracted attention away from the larger issue, namely the administration of Kim Jong-Il. In many ways, the abductees issue, like the nuclear weapons program, is merely a manifestation of more serious and fundamental deficiencies within the regime.

Second, as clearly articulated in the February agreement, a core component of any comprehensive resolution must be clear progress in normalization talks between Japan and North Korea. The abduction of Japanese citizens was a clear violation of Japan's national sovereignty, and the government has a right and obligation to protect the lives and property of its nationals. Amenable to public sentiment, which at present is vehemently anti-North Korea, the government cannot proceed without popular support. The costs of any Japanese financial assistance to North Korea would ultimately be borne by the Japanese taxpayer, and the people therefore must be convinced that their government is not merely handing out rewards for bad behavior.

What Japan has asked North Korea to do is provide verifiable truth about when and where these Japanese citizens were abducted and—if they have truly passed away—the manner and date of their deaths. If the North Korean regime adopts a sincere attitude toward settling the issue—rather than insisting the issue is already "completely resolved"—and makes a clear commitment to conducting a joint investigation, talks on normalization can move forward.

Resolution of the abductees issue, along with moves toward normalization of bilateral relations, will be mutually beneficial and go far toward achieving a more permanent peace and stability in the region.

MYTH 5:

"The North Korean nuclear issue will never be resolved."

It goes without saying that the February Joint Statement, while a significant step forward, is only a transitional agreement and will not result in a conclusive resolution of the issue in the immediate future. The North Korean government has a tendency to retain two lines vis-à-vis its foreign policy, a "hard line" and a "soft line," and it is quite likely that it will continue to engage in brinkmanship. Nevertheless, the relevant parties must continue to engage the regime with a united front until it realizes that its interests would be better served by following the softer line.

The February agreement can play an important role as a strict monitoring mechanism and road-map to resolution of the matter. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula remains a complex issue and will necessarily involve a long process through which the North Korean regime thoroughly transforms its policies.

In the meantime, a moment of truth is bound to come: will North Korea make a strategic decision? At some point in the not-too-distant future, the North Korean regime will have to choose between sticking to its nuclear devices

while the international community piles on harsh countermeasures or denuclearizing and receiving the international assistance it so badly needs. Success will require the patient and committed efforts of all parties involved.

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