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Rethinking Our Approach to the Korean Crisis

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North Korea's calculated military provocations over the past year—particularly the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island—and its continued nuclear development have raised tensions on the peninsula to dangerously high levels. If left unchecked, the situation could easily spiral out of control.

Giving extra urgency to this already dangerous scenario is the 2012 problem: next year we will see presidential elections in South Korea and the United States and a leadership change in China. The year 2012 is also North Korea's target date for becoming a "strong and prosperous country," in commemoration of the centennial of Kim Il-sung's birth, and will likely be used as a mechanism by Kim Jong-il to solidify his son Kim Jong-un's powerbase for succession. With these domestic political changes on the horizon, there is the risk that foreign policy positions will be premised on serving narrow domestic political interests rather than on building regional stability and peace. It is therefore crucial that substantial progress be made this year—before the mechanics of electoral competition and power legitimization hit full swing—to mitigate tensions and the risk of war. To this end, several

key principles for addressing the North Korea question must be observed.

Countering Future North Korean Military Provocations

The United States, South Korea, and Japan must demonstrate a strong and serious determination to counter further North Korean military provocations. The first steps in this direction have already been taken through joint US–South Korea and US–Japan military exercises, the latter of which South Korea also observed. In addition, the South Korean government is renewing its efforts to improve strike-back capabilities in border areas that are vulnerable to North Korean military provocations. But readiness to face a broad range of threats and attacks must continue to be enhanced. If such measures are not carried out, North Korea will likely calculate that it can continue to get away with military provocations.

Now that we are faced with the eruption of another North Korean crisis, trilateral cooperation should also include the formulation of full-fledged contingency planning for the defense of South Korea in the event of

North Korean aggression. The 1994 North Korean crisis led Japan and the United States to conclude a Joint Security Declaration in 1996 and adopt new Defense Cooperation Guidelines in 1997, and Japan passed the Law Concerning Measures to Ensure the Peace and Security of Japan in Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan (SIASJ) in 1999. These measures all upgraded the functions of the US-Japan alliance. However, trilateral contingency planning is still not taking place.

Contingency planning among the United States, South Korea, and Japan that builds upon the SIASJ must detail how to most effectively utilize the US-Japan alliance to advance trilateral cooperation and how Japan can support the United States in any given worst-case scenario on the Korean Peninsula. Given the legal restrictions on the role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the sensitive relationship between Japan and South Korea over this issue, the precise role of the JSDF in any contingency plans must be made absolutely clear. Further, trilateral contingency planning must also include nonmilitary aspects such as coping with refugee flows from North Korea and implementing noncombatant evacuation operation measures to protect the safety of US and Japanese nationals in South Korea.

The United States, South Korea, and Japan must clearly communicate to China that the situation on the peninsula has become dangerous enough to necessitate that China reassess its strategic relationship with North Korea. If left unchecked, the current series of North Korean military provocations could lead to serious conflicts and a bloody end for the North Korean regime. This is an unwelcome situation all around and would inflict a tremendous cost on the United States, South Korea, and Japan. But the collapse of North Korea would also inflict a tremendous cost on—and go against core interests of—China. As the only nation with any real leverage over North Korea, China could use its leverage to dissuade North Korea from perpetrating further military provocations.

Furthermore, while relations with North Korea cannot dictate the content of US-China relations, it is important that both countries realize that North Korea's modus operandi is to exploit tensions in the relations between regional powers and adjust the rhetoric of

their disagreements accordingly. The recent US-China summit in Washington gave some promising signs for better coordination between the two countries on dealing with North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and it was encouraging that the joint statement focused more on agreements than on differences. But it is still too early to tell if the discussions between Chinese President Hu Jintao and US President Barack Obama will have a long-term positive impact on the North Korea situation.

Setting the Stage for Negotiation

In retrospect, previous Six-Party Talks appear to have been used by North Korea primarily to deflect pressure rather than as a mechanism to make real progress in managing affairs or to create a credible road map for a settlement of the nuclear dispute. Even while discussions and agreements gave everybody an illusory sense of progress and comfort, North Korea continued developing its nuclear arsenal. Therefore, it makes sense that, rather than calling for a resumption of the six-party process itself in their joint statement, Presidents Hu and Obama called for “the necessary steps that would allow for early resumption.”

Given the complexities of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, informal bilateral talks with North Korea are needed to lay the foundation for negotiations and explore what is possible. This should include three sets of informal North Korean bilateral talks with the United States, South Korea, and Japan respectively. The Six-Party Talks should only be re-launched when a breakthrough is made through bilateral talks, at which point the multilateral process can take on the role of overseeing and supervising implementation of agreements that are made. Indeed, Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara has indicated that informal bilateral talks with North Korea should be held irrespective of the Six-Party Talks, recognizing the shortcomings of the six-party process.

Improving North Korea's relationship with South Korea and the United States is a crucial step toward better multilateral relations in the region. As the US-China Joint Statement rightly points out, a constructive inter-Korea dialogue will be an important step toward better North-South relations. At the same time, it will be impossible to resolve the nuclear issue without

substantive talks between the United States and the DPRK. Therefore, before any meaningful talks can be restarted between Japan and North Korea, North-South and US-DPRK dialogue must proceed first.

North Korea has signaled its willingness to have unconditional talks with South Korea, which is a welcome sign. But at the heart of the matter is North Korea's lack of credibility, which has been demonstrated repeatedly over the course of previous Six-Party Talks. Resumption of the dialogue process must be unconditional, but we must indicate to North Korea that we are not interested in holding talks just for the sake of talking. All parties must clearly demonstrate their intent to negotiate a settlement, and North Korea must prove its credibility at an early stage by showing its sincerity to move toward denuclearization. One way in which North Korea could do this is by allowing International Atomic Energy Agency inspections to verify the exact state of its nuclear development. Since North Korea has already shown its newly constructed highly enriched uranium facilities to US scientists, this should not be an insurmountable hurdle.

Negotiating a Comprehensive, Settlement

While bilateral negotiations are critical, they will not prove effective if they focus only on specific disputes in individual bilateral relationships. Rather, a comprehensive, negotiated settlement is the only practical way forward in the long run. This must include four interrelated key elements, all of which have been covered in previous Six-Party Talks agreements: (1) verifiable denuclearization of North Korea, (2) the establishment of a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula that converts the current armistice agreement to a peace treaty, (3) international economic and energy cooperation with North Korea, and (4) the normalization of diplomatic relations between North Korea on the one hand and the United States and Japan on the other.

North Korean bilateral negotiations with the United States, Japan, and South Korea respectively are necessary processes for achieving these elements. Specifically, US-DPRK talks are the key to denuclearization and must also address the peace regime and normalization. Meanwhile, North-South talks must address the peace

regime and economic cooperation. And Japan-DPRK talks must address normalization based upon the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration and the abduction issue. There is no need to call for China-DPRK or Russia-DPRK talks as they already have established diplomatic relations and ongoing dialogue.

At times the United States has seemed more concerned about the proliferation of nuclear technology than about the denuclearization of North Korea. Putting emphasis on nonproliferation may send the wrong message to Pyongyang that we could live with a limited number of North Korean nuclear weapons. But we must not accept as inevitable North Korea's status as a nuclear state, which will leave us to only address the symptoms of the problem. Denuclearization is as—or even more—important than nonproliferation because denuclearization addresses the root cause of the problem.

Negotiations must be conducted through informal bilateral talks with clear high-level political commitment and the intention of moving toward a comprehensive settlement. This requires talks to be conducted under the auspices of the heads of government to allow for US, South Korean, and Japanese coordination under a strong mandate at both the international level and the respective domestic levels. Also, knowing North Korea and its complex power struggles, it is essential that we deal with its true center of power. This means the establishment of a streamlined and direct negotiation channel for political dialogue between Kim Jong-il and negotiators, and at the penultimate stage we must deal directly with Kim Jong-il in person as Japan did in 2002 under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.



North Korea's recent military provocations have resulted in dangerously high regional tensions and even a renewed risk of war. Efforts over the past seven years to address the situation on the Korean Peninsula through the Six-Party Talks have been unsuccessful at finding sustainable solutions, so it is only logical that we look for new approaches before the situation gets out of hand. A comprehensive settlement requires a coordinated effort to institute parallel intense,

high-level negotiations at the bilateral level before all of the parties can return to the table to reengage in the six-party process. Without such bold steps, one can only expect the situation to get worse, with devastating consequences for everyone involved.

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