

Session 9: North Korea's Nuclear Program

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Summary

As would be expected, all four panelists understand the seriousness of North Korea's nuclear program; however, each panelist addressed the problem from a different perspective.

Kim Sung-han believes that North Korea is facing a triangular dilemma: concerns about Kim Jong-il's health; the power succession question; and the need to maintain a military first policy, especially during a succession scenario. He went on to acknowledge the weakness of the Six Party Talks (6PTs) due to their gradualist "salami tactics" approach; however, he recognized that there still was no alternative to the talks. Finally, he wanted to emphasize the fact that North Korea needed to show its sincerity to denuclearize in order to get things back on track. Additionally, North Korea needs to respect the armistice agreement, which means that it must stop its military provocations. However, he explained that the current Lee Myung-bak administration is not demanding an apology before inter-Korean nuclear talks can occur.

Liu Ming offered several points to summarize the latest developments regarding the North Korea nuclear problem. First, the North Korea nuclear issue has become protracted, and unfortunately denuclearization, in the near-term, was highly unlikely if not impossible. Therefore, we (the international community) need to exercise patience. Some of his other points included the fact that though the 6PTs had problems, it was difficult to conceive of a mechanism to replace them. He also felt that North Korea's nuclear weapons are more symbolically important rather than tactically important and are a sign of prestige. He also reinforced the position that China craves stability in North Korea, and its major fear is that

there will be chaos on the Peninsula.

Yuki Tatsumi offered a Japanese perspective. As she articulated, in Japan, the North Korea nuclear issue represents the most tangible short-term security threat. However, Japan and North Korea don't have diplomatic relations; therefore, the interactions between the two countries are scant or nonexistent. North Korea only seems to engage with it in an effort to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Japan. She also noted that because of history and continuing territorial disputes, Japan doesn't want to appear as too vigorously engaging in issues related to the Peninsula's future. She also underscored that the abduction issue is still politically sensitive in Japan which adds further layers of complexity to Japan's participation within the 6PTs mechanism.

Finally, Alan Romberg outlined several of the U.S. goals when it comes to the North Korea nuclear issue: total irreversible denuclearization, preventing proliferation, maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, and closely coordinating with our allies and with China. He noted, however, that these goals exist on very different time horizons, and that the answers to some of these issues also lie in the policies of other players. Finally, though Mr. Romberg credited China's constructive behavior in recent months, he feels that it must do more than just stop North Korea from "doing bad things;" rather, China must be more proactive in shaping North Korea's behavior and take more responsibility for trying to solve this problem.

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