

[SE9-GB-2] North Korea's Nuclear Program

Duyeon Kim

Deputy Director, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

Full Summary

Panelists assessed the current stalemate in the North Korean nuclear saga from a policy perspective. In his opening remarks, Professor Kim Sung-han with Korea University assessed the current stalemate after the Six Party Talks broke down in 2008. He explained that Pyongyang faced a triangular dilemma in 2009 with the sudden deterioration of Kim Jong-il's health, a power succession to one of his sons and the need for North Korea to stick to its military-first policy to ensure a smooth leadership succession. Professor Kim explained that this triangular dilemma prevented the North from having sufficient room to accept the Obama administration's approach for direct talks. While there is no better alternative to the Six Party Talks, Professor Kim argues that the framework showed weaknesses thereby allowing North Korea to rely on salami tactics to buy time because the other five parties relied on a three-stage approach to Pyongyang's denuclearization. Such is the basis for President Lee Myung-bak's Grand Bargain as well as Seoul's demand for a display of sincerity and responsible attitude toward sinking the Cheonan and shelling Yeonpyeong Island. Professor Kim noted some examples of such sincerity include the suspension of all nuclear activities and re-invitation of IAEA inspectors as well as respect for the armistice regime by ending military provocations. As for China's three-phase proposal in resuming the Six Party Talks, Dr. Kim stressed that the Lee administration is not demanding an apology for Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island before inter-Korean talks, but that Seoul is maintaining "strategic ambiguity."

Professor Liu Ming with the Shanghai Academy of Social Science opened his remarks by calling for patience when dealing with North Korea noting that China believes it is impossible to achieve denuclearization in two to three years. He argued that Pyongyang's possession of and ambitions for nuclear weapons are not for security purposes but rather "an excuse for North Korea." Instead, Professor Liu claims that Pyongyang's objective is for equal leverage vis-à-vis China, and nuclear weapons are a symbol for prestige in the face of the North's domestic audience in order to elicit loyalty from the North Korean people. Professor Liu says the other objective is to offset South Korea's economic superiority. He down played the gravity of Pyongyang's two nuclear tests pointing to the lack of sufficient evidence on the North's nuclear capabilities. Professor Liu stressed that Pyongyang

“calculated very smartly” in engaging in military provocations and nuclear tests to threaten the outside world. He argued that Pyongyang will only “try to go to the bottom line but they will stop before going to the bottom line” to avoid US retaliation. As for China’s policy toward North Korea, Professor Liu explained that Beijing lost hope for denuclearization after Pyongyang’s two nuclear tests, and received criticism for investing too many resources in the Six Party Talks that have produced agreements as well as an embarrassment of no results. Professor Liu also stressed that Beijing shifted its focus from denuclearization to a North Korean leadership transition upon calculation that there may be chaos on the Korean Peninsula upon Kim Jong-il’s death.

In her opening remarks, Yuki Tatsumi with the Stimson Center explained that Japan sees the North Korean nuclear problem as the most tangible security concern in the short term, which is why Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs have been the drivers for Tokyo to augment its own military capability and relations with the US. Ms. Tatsumi argues that Japan will not proactively initiate action in the Six Party Talks due to Tokyo’s lack of leverage over Pyongyang bilaterally, citing the absence of diplomatic relations with North Korea and Pyongyang’s open preference to discuss bilaterally with Washington alone. She stressed that North Korea only chooses to engage Japan when Pyongyang perceives it will help drive a wedge between the US and Japan. Ms. Tatsumi further explained that historical issues act as an automatic restraint for Japan in becoming an active participant in nuclear discussions. Regarding the current stalemate and challenges for Japan, she argues that while the Six Party Talks is the only feasible venue to address the nuclear problem, Japan’s sensitivity in relations with the Korean peninsula historically coupled with Tokyo’s own limitations on leverage will ultimately limit Japan’s ability to initiate bilateral discussions within the Six Party Talks framework. Ms. Tatsumi also claims that it will be difficult for Tokyo to turn inward and engage diplomatically outward in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster and unresolved historical issue of abductees.

Moderator Alan Romberg with the Stimson Center assessed US objectives to be the total irreversible elimination of programs including the North’s uranium enrichment program, preventing proliferation, maintaining peace and stability on the Peninsula and region, keeping close alliance relations, and working cooperatively with China. Mr. Romberg believes US prioritization lies in timing and policies of other players. He stressed that while “no one sees the path towards success on total denuclearization,” the US has not given up on it, but rather, the question is how to manage the issue. Mr. Romberg noted two problems: 1. The Obama administration placed the strengthening of alliance relations as a very high priority, and 2. North Korea will not dismantle its existing programs nor will it take steps to prevent proliferation. While humanitarian food aid could have some effect on the overall atmosphere on the nuclear issue, Mr. Romberg believes it could drive a wedge between Washington and

Seoul.

In the Q&A, Professor Kim cited Professor Liu's claims that nuclear weapons are not for usage but only for possession but pointed out that there is no distinction in terms of its effectiveness in the strategic community. Professor Kim provided an example of a conventional war on the Peninsula during which Pyongyang may threaten to use a nuclear weapon against US forces in Guam to prevent Washington from sending troops to the North. In other words, Professor Kim says North Korea believes nuclear weapons prevent South Korea from retaliating against the regime.

As for economic aid to North Korea, Professor Liu claims China will not cut off economic aid completely due to humanitarian concerns, but did imply that Beijing could turn off the switch if Pyongyang "goes too far." To this, Professor Kim noted the difference between economic aid and economic cooperation. He claims that Beijing's preference is "tilted toward economic cooperation and not unconditional economic aid," which is a possible explanation as to why Kim Jong-il walked away from his recent visit to China. He speculated that Kim Jong-il may have wanted more immediate economic assistance from Beijing but that China wanted a more market-based economic cooperation with its ally. Professor Kim also pointed to the "irony" in North Korea where markets are emerging under economic sanctions imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 1874, which means that the North Korean people are exploring creative ways to feed themselves due to a shortage of government food.

In answering a question on emerging nuclear states, Ms. Tatsumi said the North Korean case shows that "becoming a bonafide nuclear power is a long tough road and you have to be prepared to withstand economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. On the other hand, since the Six Party Talks have been going on for this long, it also sends a message that if you just test a nuclear [device], it's hard for other parties to roll back [your] capabilities."

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

* The views expressed here are panel overviews of the Asan Plenum. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the author or the institutions they are affiliated with.
