

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Prospects for Resolving the North Korea Issue

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Positive change was underway in North Korea. The new leadership in Pyongyang, with Kim Jong-Un, the youngest son of Kim Jong-Il, at the helm, appeared to be pursuing a policy of guarded economic and political reforms. The speed with which he replaced many of his father's loyalists, including the Minister of State Security, the Chief of Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA), the Director of the General Political Department and the Minister of Defense of the KPA, in addition to other less prominent senior officials, was impressive. The appointment of Korean Workers Party (Party) official Ch'oe Ryong-hae as the new Director of the General Political Department of the KPA was significant in that a Party official is now overseeing the work of the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff, both professional military officers. This was a bold and potentially significant move by the young leader who, for the first time, appointed a Party official to manage the powerful military, in effect trying to insure that the Party controls the gun.

The one senior official that Kim Jong-Un retained, Jang Song Taek, is the Vice Chairman of the powerful National Defense Commission and Chief of the Party's Central Administrative Department. This was the most significant decision of his early administration. Jang is an interesting official who is married to Kim Jong-Il's sister, Kim Kyong Hui – a senior official who is reportedly ill. Jang was close to Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il and, although highly regarded by both, was purged twice for reasons still unclear. Jang, who maintains a low profile, has traveled often to China, alone and with Kim Jong-Il, to observe China's economic reforms. He reportedly was impressed with what he saw.

Jang Song Taek's August 2012 trip to China, during which he met President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and others to discuss economic cooperation between North Korea and China, was encouraging. China's decision to help with two of North Korea's four economic zones, in Rason and Hwanggumphyong, was a positive development, although to date there has been minimal progress. Reportedly, Jang also discussed an upcoming visit of Kim Jong-Un to China, which will put North Korea on a path to improving relations with a China that has been critical of North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations. A Kim Jong-Un visit to China is likely to meet with China's new General Secretary of Communist Party, Xi Jinping.

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Recent reporting that North Korea was cautiously pursuing agricultural reforms was another positive development. Previously, farmers were paid a meager salary for their work, with the entire crop going to the government. It appears that North Korea has commenced with a pilot program that will provide farmers with 30% of the crop, with the State taking 70%. And the number of workers in each work unit responsible for designated agricultural plots was decreased significantly. These tentative moves appear to be designed to give an incentive to these agricultural workers to encourage them to work hard and produce more since they will be receiving a percentage of the crop, rather than a salary independent of the size of the crop. The speed with which this pilot program moves forward is problematic, given North Korea's cautious approach to any type of economic reform.

As Kim Jong-Un navigates these domestic leadership issues and contemplates needed economic and political reforms, he can no longer divert international attention away from North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. He and his senior advisers know that failure to resolve these issues, in a comprehensive and verifiable way, will keep North Korea in the penalty box, with United Nations-imposed sanctions and a denial of access to international financial institutions. Any economic reform program under such circumstances will fail.

The international outcry after North Korea's April 2012 failed satellite launch of a TD-2 missile was loud and clear. It was emblematic of the international community's frustration with a North Korea that, during ten years of Six Party talks, succeeded in building more nuclear weapons, while developing and testing more advanced missiles. Of note was North Korea's willingness to sell a significant number of their short and mid-range missiles to countries in the Middle East. The successful missile launched in December 2012 and the resultant UN Security Council Resolution condemning North Korea, incited Pyongyang to announce their intention to conduct another nuclear test, which appears imminent.

Of great concern is North Korea's clandestine pursuit, going back to the 1990s, of a uranium enrichment program for nuclear weapons. When initially confronted with this information, in bilateral discussions with a visiting U.S. delegation in October 2002, North Korea admitted they were pursuing such a program. Subsequent to that admission, North Korea has denied having such a program. However, in 2010, North Korea disclosed that they had constructed, in less than two years, a state of the art centrifuge facility in Yongbyon with two thousand spinning centrifuges. This was a wakeup call to the international community, especially those governments and senior officials who insisted that North Korea was not capable of establishing a uranium enrichment capability. The foreign experts who visited this uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon and others knowledgeable of the technologies involved concluded that North Korea must have other facilities capable of fabricating and spinning centrifuges for weapon-grade Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). North Korea denies having other facilities and denies that their intent is to manufacture weapon-grade HEU. Their denial is not credible.

Indeed, it was the issue of North Korea's pursuit of an HEU program, in violation of the North-South Declaration of 1991 (not to reprocess spent fuel rods for plutonium or enrich uranium), the spirit of the Agreed Framework of 1994 and the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligation to declare the acquisition of materials and intent to pursue an enrichment capability, that resulted in North Korea, when confronted with this information, withdrawing in January 2003 from the NPT. North Korea is the only country to withdraw from this organization. Also during this period, the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO)

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suspended shipment of heavy fuel oil to North Korea and ceased further work on the construction of two light water reactors at Kumho, North Korea pursuant to commitments made in the 1994 Agreed Framework. Once North Korea withdrew from the NPT, events deteriorated quickly, with North Korea threatening to abandon the 1953 Armistice Agreement and, in February 2003, permitting a North Korea jet fighter to enter South Korean airspace. In March 2003, North Korea intercepted a U.S. reconnaissance plane in international airspace and a week later fired a short-range missile into the Sea of Japan. The situation with North Korea was tense.

Given the downward spiral of events on the Korean Peninsula, China, in April 2003, hosted trilateral talks in Beijing between the U.S., North Korea and China. This was the beginning of China's critical role in trying to help resolve the nuclear issue with North Korea. At these talks in April, North Korea said it had nuclear weapons. There were other provocative statements from North Korea which made it clear to the U.S. and China that the nuclear issue with North Korea had to be resolved. Thus, a decision was made to establish a multilateral forum to address the North Korea nuclear issue.

A little background is necessary to put into perspective the work that has gone into the nuclear issue with North Korea, with minimal results. In August 2003, the Six Party Talks held its first meeting in Beijing, with China in the Chair and Russia, Japan, the U.S. and South Korea all joining North Korea in a multilateral process to resolve nuclear-related issues with North Korea. The second round of Talks was held in February 2004, followed by Working Group meetings. Nothing developed from these meetings and during the months that followed, North Korea declared that they had manufactured nuclear weapons and claimed to be a "fully-fledged nuclear weapons state," demanding that the Six Party Talks be "disarmament talks."

In the months that followed, China and the U.S. conducted bilateral meetings with North Korea, in addition to the formal Six Party Talks plenary sessions, with no significant progress. The fourth round of Six Party Talks, in September 2005, was productive, with a Joint Statement stating that North Korea was prepared to dismantle all of their existing nuclear programs in exchange for economic assistance, ultimate normalization of relations with the U.S. and the provision of a light water reactor to North Korea when they return to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state.

During these meetings chaired by China, much effort went into resolving all extant issues with North Korea. The success of the September 2005 Joint Statement was short-lived, however, when North Korea launched seven missiles, including a long-range TD-2 in July 2006. A nuclear test in October 2006 followed. In response to these events, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolutions 1695 and 1718 imposing sanctions on North Korea. Eventually, North Korea returned to Six Party negotiations, only to balk when issues dealing with verification were discussed. Another round of missile launches and a nuclear test were conducted in 2009, followed by additional UN sanctions. Since then, despite the effort of China and others, there has been no progress.

Guarded optimism materialized when the lead U.S. negotiator met with his counterpart in February 2012, after the death of Kim Jong-II. It appeared that in return for significant nutritional assistance from the U.S., North Korea was prepared to implement a moratorium on missile launches and refrain from a third nuclear test. This short period of optimism was dashed when North Korea launched Unha-3 missiles in April and December 2012, thus nullifying the agreement of February and accruing additional UN sanctions. Since then, there has been no diplomatic progress with North Korea.

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The only real movement has been between China and North Korea, mostly on bilateral and economic issues. China has leverage with North Korea because of the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the two countries and its significant food and energy assistance and trade. Thus, expectations are that China eventually can convince North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks and ultimately dismantle its nuclear weapons programs. Despite the effort China has made to accomplish this goal, the reality is that China's ability and willingness to dictate to North Korea appears to be limited. If anything, North Korea cherishes its sovereignty, at any cost.

The new leadership in North Korea has an opportunity to address and eventually resolve the nuclear standoff with the international community. This is especially relevant now, with the election of President Obama for a second term, the appointment of Xi Jinping as China's new General Secretary of the Communist Party, the election in South Korea of Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Japan. Kim Jong-Un should seize this opportunity and display to the world and his own people that he has the power and vision to resolve the impasse with the international community; that North Korea is willing to implement the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement that commits North Korea to comprehensive and verifiable denuclearization in exchange for a package of economic and security assurances and ultimate normalization of bilateral relations. With this, the 24 million people in North Korea and its leadership will join the international community and experience tangible economic reforms, while contributing to the peace and stability in the world. This is Kim Jong-Un's challenge and opportunity. Unfortunately, however, North Korea's December Unha-3 launch was movement in the wrong direction. It also appears that the hardliners that Kim Jong-Un was removing from his government are returning, causing Kim Jong-Un to reverse some of his initial positive decisions. Kim Jong-Un can again reverse this negative trend and put North Korea on the correct path of economic growth and international legitimacy. The world is waiting.

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