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The US and North Korea in September 2007: Talking Works, But Now What?

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It may be recalled that, following the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006, the Bush administration was a supporter of UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea (Press Conference by the President, 11 October 2006, White House Press Release, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061011-5.html). The Bush administration's price for lifting sanctions was verifiable denuclearisation of North Korea as a precondition for the lifting of sanctions and the provision of economic aid (President's Remarks on United Nations Security Council Resolution on North Korea, 14 October 2006, White House Press Release, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061014-1.html). Over the last matter of weeks, however, a different posture has come to define the Bush administration's approach towards North Korea; the press coverage surrounding the latest round of the talks in Geneva indicates the adoption of graduated, reciprocal confidence and trust-building measures. What has changed, and why, and what does this mean for the foreseeable future?

Faced with the Republican losses during the Congressional mid-term elections of November 2006 and an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, the Bush administration was evidently compelled to acknowledge that continued adherence to demands for North Korean denuclearisation as a precondition for the lifting of sanctions was not pragmatic, and has shifted toward a more flexible negotiating posture similar to that adopted by the Clinton administration during the implementation of the Agreed Framework that resolved, albeit temporarily, the 1993-94 nuclear crisis. In short, talking about mutual interests, rather than bargaining over concessions, works.

At the same time, however, a glance at the implementation of the 1994 Agreed Framework from 1995 to 2000 suggests that the road ahead in denuclearising North Korea will not be easy. The Agreed Framework came close to collapse on several occasions, following the 1996 North

Korean submarine incursion into South Korea, over the slow delivery of oil to Pyongyang, over Washington's slow easing of sanctions, and again following the 1998 North Korean missile test. Looking ahead, four potential hurdles to the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula can be identified.

First, Washington and Pyongyang evidently have different perceptions of their obligations under the latest agreement in Geneva. The American negotiator, Christopher Hill, announced that North Korea 'will provide a full declaration of all of their nuclear programs and will disable their nuclear programs by the end of this year'('Nuclear Pact Broadening, North Korea and U.S. Say', New York Times, 3 September 2007). However, in a separate news conference, his North Korean counterpart, Kim Gye Gwan, said nothing about disabling the North Korean plutonium reactor at Yongbyon by the end of 2007, instead speaking of Pyongyang's willingness to 'provide an accounting of its facilities, fuel and weapons in return for what he called "political and economic compensation" ('Nuclear Pact Broadening', New York Times). Evidently, Washington views the latest agreement in Geneva as primarily a denuclearisation agreement, whilst Pyongyang views it as a litmus test of Washington's goodwill to North Korea. The difference in US and North Korean perceptions of diplomatic agreements should not be underestimated. Washington and Pyongyang had similar differences in how they interpreted their obligations under the 1994 Agreed Framework, with the result that, between 1996 and 1998, both sides accused one another of reneging on the agreement.

A second difficulty may arise from the fact that moving too quickly to implement the latest agreement may spark a backlash from conservative opinions in Washington, Pyongyang, Seoul and Tokyo. Former Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton has warned that 'There is still simply no evidence that Pyongyang has made a decision to abandon its long-held strategic objective to have a credible nuclear-weapons capability' ('Nuclear Pact Broadening', New York Times). The pro-Pyongyang Korean Central News Agency, meanwhile, has condemned ongoing US military exercises as 'a direct military threat and provocation to the DPRK'('U.S. Reckless Military Moves Blasted' Korean Central News Agency, 28 August 2007). Previously, a Korea Herald editorial had referred to North Korea as 'a little child who will try to get all it can get from

others while demonstrating blatant disregard for norms of good behavior'('Two-facedness', The Korea Herald Editorial, 23 August 2007). Moving too quickly to implement such an agreement amidst the high levels of mistrust between North Korea on the one hand, and the US, South Korea and Japan on the other, may cause domestic conservative backlashes in Pyongyang, Washington, Seoul and Tokyo that complicate long-term implementation of the agreement reached at the Geneva talks. Furthermore, conservatives in Seoul and Tokyo may fear that the US security commitment to Northeast Asian will be downgraded, and this may fuel South Korean and / or Japanese nuclear ambitions.

Third, due to the sheer extent of North Korea's economic difficulties resulting from floods, famines, droughts and economic mismanagement, it is likely that Pyongyang will demand high levels of economic aid as a quid pro quo for dismantling its nuclear facilities. There is a danger that such North Korean demands may become a difficult domestic political agenda for Washington, Seoul and Tokyo to accept, particularly if North Korean government and news agencies continue their constant use of belligerent rhetoric against South Korea, Japan and the US.

Fourth, although the Geneva talks has to be acknowledged as a significant step forward in the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, it is likely that the significant conventional material capabilities of the US, North Korea, South Korea and Japan will complicate the process of confidence and trust-building. Although US ground forces are heavily involved in Iraq, US air and naval assets based in the Asia-Pacific and the continental United States have not been significantly encumbered by the War on Terror, and could be used to launch air attacks on North Korea at short notice. Similarly, although the North Korean military is equipped with weaponry of 1960s vintage, the size of its army and its proximity to Seoul continue to provide Pyongyang with the ability to inflict significant devastation on South Korea if it so chooses. South Korea and Japan are also in the midst of upgrading their respective armaments. Although a war on the Korean peninsula would be extremely costly for all involved, their significant military capabilities are likely to make it difficult for Pyongyang on the one hand, and Washington, Seoul

and Tokyo on the other, to clearly distinguish one another's military postures as offensive or defensive for the foreseeable future.

This is not to say that the breakthrough in the Geneva talks should be dismissed. Rather, it would be fair to say that although talking with one's adversary can achieve results in moving away from stalemate, the difficulties and hurdles in reducing tension and suspicion, and building trust as a prelude to ending confrontation, have to be acknowledged if a decisive, long-term end to the decades of hostility in Northeast Asia is to be achieved. Recognising and overcoming the difficulties of moving too quickly or too slowly in implementing the latest agreement in Geneva will require a delicate juggling act for all the parties involved.

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