

# Obama's Policy Option on North Korea

*David Lai*

The United States has some very troublesome business in Northeast Asia, namely its conflict-filled relationship with North Korea. This situation constitutes the longest-ever direct involvement of the United States in a conflict on foreign soil (beginning in 1950 when the United States entered the Korean War). Since the mid-1990s, North Korea's quest for nuclear status has complicated US foreign policy objectives in the region. Successive US leaders have tried different approaches, yet none has produced the desired results. The key problem is that the United States deals with North Korea under a certain set of assumptions including that: the North Korean regime will not last; it is developing nuclear power as a bargaining chip; it can be lured into US carrot-and-stick policy traps; and it will eventually yield to US pressure. These assumptions have turned out to be erroneous. President Obama needs

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*David Lai is a research professor of Asian Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute of the United States Army War College.*

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to re-evaluate the nature of the United States' conflict with North Korea as well as the US role in Northeast Asia, and then develop a workable approach to pursuing US interests in the region.

### A REALITY WE HATE TO ACCEPT

In its routinely erratic way, North Korea detonated a second underground nuclear device on May 25, 2009 (following the first in October 2006) and soon after test-fired several short-range missiles. Earlier, in April, North Korea had defiantly test-launched a long-range missile (North Korea claimed it was a satellite test-launch). Following these provocative acts, North Korea lashed out with a storm of bellicose statements directed at the United States as well as the international condemnation it faced. It also took the occasion to declare its withdrawal from the Six Party Talks (6-PT) and the Korean War Armistice Agreement, and threatened to conduct more nuclear and missile tests.

Speculations abound about the intent behind these belligerent acts. Some believed that the North Korean leadership was upset that the Obama Administration had put it on the backburner, and thus acted this way in order to regain the spotlight. Others ridiculed North Korea's acts as old tricks to be used once again as bargaining chips in the next round of negotiations. Many also speculated that North Korea was experiencing internal problems, and an ailing Kim Jung-Il was making efforts to consolidate internal support for the son who would succeed him.

We may never figure out what North Korea's true intents were, but regardless, the serious implications of these provocative acts should be seen in light of their great importance. First, after years of playing hide-and-seek with the United States and other powers in Northeast Asia, North Korea has shown that it has maintained a functioning nuclear weapons program and delivery capability. Second, North Korea's defiant acts have also exposed the problems with the 6-PT. Since the initiation of the 6-PT in 2003, the United States, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia have worked hard to get North Korea to agree to terms that would lead towards the disablement of its nuclear weapons program. Those agreements have turned out to be quite fragile, and the nations involved in the negotiation have not been able to hold North Korea accountable for its provocative behavior. With the putative success of its second nuclear test, North Korea has stepped up its demand for recognition as a nuclear power, and future talks on its nuclear weapons, if they take place, may be on nuclear arms control rather than on denuclearization.

The stark reality is that US policy toward North Korea and its quest to become a nuclear power is largely a failure. For too long, the United States has treated North Korea as a juvenile delinquent and responded to its provocative acts in a haphazard manner with a combination of threats and concessions. Time and again, the United States has dealt with North Korea, but with no vision for how to make progress. North Korea has been able to take advantage of these shortcomings while making steady advances on its nuclear weapons program and delivery capability.

## MANDATE FOR CHANGE

Frustrated with these setbacks, the United States is now back to asking the same old question: what should be done about this defiant nation? President Obama came to office with a mandate to construct a foreign policy very different from the one pursued by his predecessor. He has taken the initiative with Cuba, reached out to Iran and extended olive branches to Muslim nations. Obama intended to do the same with North Korea and was willing to deal with Pyongyang directly. However, enraged at North Korea's provocative acts, President Obama has decided to once again "take a hard look" at US policy on North Korea.

Unlike the guessing game as to what North Korea will do, we know how this "hard look" will turn out. Living up to the old adage that "when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail," in dealing with North Korea's provocations, the United States reaches for the same tool every time, no matter if it repeatedly failed to do the job in the past. Every time Pyongyang does something outrageous, all the United States can think of are measures for "getting tough", such as applying pressure, meting out punishment or putting North Korea back on the list of terrorist states. Indeed, President Obama is already talking in those terms and making it clear that there will be no rewards for North Korea's bad behavior.

Obviously, getting tough is not a new answer to this old question. It would just be another haphazard US reaction to North Korea's actions. We already know that sanctions, embargos and military posturing have a limited effect on the regime. Warning Obama not to go down this path, Mike Chinoy, a long-time Asia specialist for CNN, has noted the maxim that, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."<sup>1</sup>

This reminder has come a bit late. The United States has already gone to the UN Security Council and obtained a new resolution to toughen sanctions on North Korea. The defiant delinquent responded as expected. North Korea declared that it had been enriching uranium and would weaponize all of its reprocessed, weapons grade plutonium. In response, at a joint press conference with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, President Obama vowed that, "We are going to break that pattern." Obama meant that he would stand firm this time and never yield again. The president's resolve will find its test when the United States takes measures to implement the sanctions and when it responds to future North Korean acts, such as missile launches and more nuclear tests.

Unfortunately, sanctions and tough measures will intensify confrontations, but will not change North Korea's behavior. President Obama would be better served by directing his attention to developing a truly workable agenda for the North Korean issue. And a good place to start would be to straighten out some of the United States' own views. First, what is our problem with North Korea? Is it a problem with North Korea's efforts to develop nuclear weapons? Or is it a problem with the North Korea

regime itself? The United States obviously has a problem with both, and there is no denying that many Americans believe that a change of the rogue regime in our favor would automatically resolve the nuclear issue (with the assumption that if North Korea turns democratic, it will not feel the need to develop nukes).

Ultimately, though the Kim regime is at the center of the problem, we cannot count on a toppling of the leadership to solve the present nuclear issue. For obvious reasons, a fast and forceful Iraq-like regime change in North Korea is practically out of the question unless North Korea launches an attack on the United States (on the American troops in Northeast Asia or an Al-Qaeda-like attack on the US homeland), which would force the United States to take military action. A second option would be to wait for Kim Jong-Il's demise and the collapse of his regime. But this option does not look promising because Kim is reportedly grooming his son Kim Jong-un to succeed him. If the young Kim carries on the family dynasty, we will have a long time to wait as he is only in his twenties.<sup>2</sup> The final option would be to promote gradual change in North Korea. There is really no telling how long and how much it would take to make such a change.

The second question the United States should ask itself is on how to deal with the North Korea nuclear issue. Given North Korea's advances in nuclear arms and its determination to further develop and maintain nuclear weapons, is it still feasible to insist on denuclearization as a pre-condition for talks and the improvement of US-DPRK relations? Or should the United States answer North Korea's repeated calls to replace the Armistice Agreement of the Korean War with a peace treaty and normalize relations with North Korea before settling the nuclear issue? These are the issues that stalemated the 6-PT.

In addition, should the United States continue to rely on the 6-PT or go one-on-one and deal with North Korea directly? It appears that in the face of the ongoing confrontation, the United States has no alternative but to ask China for help once again. In the past six years, China has brought the 6-PT back to life several times after they had been pronounced dead as a result of North Korea breaking them off. In the current situation, China could still resuscitate them one more time. Indeed, when the recent confrontation erupted, while China joined the world in condemning North Korea's second nuclear test, it also continued its call for calm, caution and restraint. At the same time, China reiterated its stance on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and kept the door open for the return of the 6-PT.

However, President Obama should be clear on what China's role is and the limitations of the 6-PT. In the United States, many pundits accuse China of trying to subvert US attempts to impose sanctions, arguing that Beijing has the most influence over Pyongyang yet refuses to use it. But such positions fail to grasp the geopolitical realities of the North Korean standoff. China is a broker, not a problem solver in this business. China knows its role and plays it carefully. North Korea and the United States are the principal parties in this quarrel. If the United States were willing and

able to deal with North Korea directly, China would not even be in this game in the first place. Indeed, North Korea always preferred to deal with the United States alone. It viewed the 6-PT as a US effort to get five great powers to “gang up” against it. Thus, every time North Korea could find an excuse, it broke away from the talks.

North Korea is actually more of a liability than leverage for China. Contrary to American perceptions, China cannot dictate how North Korea acts. China does not join the United States in “punishing” North Korea because the Chinese know that American attention comes and goes, while China and North Korea are neighbors. Thus, China has to live with North Korea, so why would it ruin its bilateral relationship for the sake of the United States’ problems?<sup>3</sup>

Many in the United States dismiss the 6-PT while forgetting why they came about in the first place. The primary reason was that President Bush refused to deal with a member of the “Axis of Evil” directly. Thus, China was asked to intervene when the North Korean nuclear crisis broke out in October 2002. The second reason, which the North Koreans themselves accurately identified, was the United States’ effort to put multilateral pressure on North Korea. Finally, the United States believed that the resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue could be costly, so it wanted other great powers to share the burden.

#### A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

President Obama should see that the shortest route to the solution of the North Korean nuclear issue is the direct one between Washington and Pyongyang. Yet given the unending confrontations with North Korea, the United States also has to make a stop in Beijing. In addition, Obama should see that the reasons for the 6-PT still hold, and it is necessary to get the 6-PT back to work. Finally, the president needs a realistic, workable approach to North Korea.

China and Russia have long maintained that the North Korea problem is a remnant of the Cold War. They claim that it is a result of North Korea and the United States failing to make timely adjustments in their relations at the end of the Cold War (Russia and China normalized their relations with their Cold War opponent South Korea in 1991 and 1992 respectively). Thus, it follows that North Korea’s quest for nuclear weapons is an answer to its perceived security threat from the United States. Washington holds the key to the North Korean issue, and it is time the United States stops letting emotions dictate its foreign policy and should deal with North Korea pragmatically. That being said, it is unrealistic to propose change to the US approach toward North Korea at the height of the current confrontation. But the time will come when the United States has to sit down with North Korea to find a way out.<sup>4</sup> In the next round of negotiations, President Obama should offer North Korea a pragmatic approach to get the two nations out of this senseless agony. Here are the key elements of this new potential approach:

First, we know that North Korea wants to settle its problems with the United

States directly. However, North Korea's problems are ultimately Northeast Asian regional problems. Thus, the United States should deal with North Korea directly in the context of the 6-PT. That is, much like what former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill did during the previous 6-PT, the United States can reach tentative agreements directly with North Korea in separate meetings and then bring in the other four parties to endorse these agreements and commit to their respective responsibilities. The United States should also take a new action-for-action approach with North Korea. Unlike the previous approach, which required North Korea to freeze its nuclear facilities first, the United States should take the initiative and ease North Korea's security concerns in return for North Korea freezing its nuclear weapons program. The US initiatives should include a peace treaty to conclude the Korean War, which would entail the withdrawal of US combat troops from South Korea and diplomatic recognition as part of normalizing relations with North Korea. Along with the normalization of relations, the United States should promote full-fledged exchanges with North Korea, most notably, economic trade and development, education and cultural exchanges.

These are not revolutionary ideas. The United States has reassured North Korea many times, verbally and in written form, in the Agreed Framework of 1994 and the 6-PT statements, that the United States respects North Korea's sovereignty, the United States has no intention of invading North Korea and the United States will normalize relations with North Korea when the time is right. All of these promises were made on the condition that North Korea abandoned its nuclear program first. The key this time is for the United States to be willing to make the first move.

The United States should make no secret about this pragmatic approach and what to expect from it. This would be an adjustment based on the reality that the United States has refused to face for a long time and not another concession. This new approach would fundamentally change the nature of the game and US-North Korea relations. By extricating itself from direct conflict in Northeast Asia, the United States would expect the nations in this region to take full responsibility in pursuing the goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. The United States would be declaring its commitment to this goal and working with the involved parties to bring the nuclear weapon issue to a satisfactory conclusion.

The United States came to the Korean Peninsula 60 years ago with the good intention of helping the Koreans; however, the situation has changed over time. The US military presence is now increasingly perceived as an obstacle to the Korean unification process. The withdrawal of US combat troops from South Korea is meant to remove this obstacle. Although the United States surely wishes the Koreans all the best in their unification efforts, at the same time, it wants to see this unification take place through peaceful means, not through war.

Peace, security and economic prosperity in Northeast Asia are vital interests of the United States. Thus, the United States would continue to maintain the capac-

ity to safeguard these interests and stay engaged in Northeast Asia, but in a different capacity—it could serve as an honest broker or a strategic “off-shore balancer.”<sup>5</sup> The fundamental change brought about by this pragmatic approach would give the United States greater strategic flexibility to carry out its mission.

The United States is a moralistic and passionate nation. Americans define foreign policy issues in terms of good or bad and take action on this basis, rather than on the basis of what is necessary. Although North Korea currently has diplomatic relations with over 100 countries, including all of the European Union members (except France and Estonia), most Asia-Pacific countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico and many others, many Americans still find it immoral to deal with North Korea in the pragmatic ways proposed above. Americans need to remember President George Washington's advice that, “Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded... The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.”<sup>6</sup> For President Obama, he should keep faith in his mandate for change and take this pragmatic approach to solve the North Korea issue for good. 🍌

*\*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Army War College, the US Army, the Department of Defense or the US government.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mike Chinoy, “Obama Must Leave Door Open to N. Korea,” Anderson Cooper 360° at CNN.com, June 8, 2009. The adage is a famous quote from Albert Einstein.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Jong-Il reportedly has two daughters and three sons (there is no official information about Kim's personal life). The oldest son, Kim Jong-nam (b. 1971), gave a rare interview with the Japanese broadcaster NTV in Macau, China on June 7, 2009 and “confirmed” that his father likes his youngest brother Kim Jong-un, a succession is in the making and he is not interested in it. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8087736.stm>, accessed July 15, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Living with North Korea is part of China's overall strategy to create and maintain favorable border security (周边安全) for China's modernization mission. China and North Korea are not as close as the outside world believes. The two nations have had ups and downs in their relations in the last 60 years. They formed a “lip-and-teeth” and “blood-bond” relationship through the Korean War of 1950-53. North Korea, however, stayed neutral during the China-Soviet split in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but tilted toward the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s. When Mao launched the disastrous “Cultural Revolution” in 1966, North Korea dismissed the Chinese political movement as too radical. But when Deng Xiaoping got China on its path of economic reforms in 1978, North Korea dismissed China's move as a betrayal to communism. At the end of the Cold War, North Korea was upset with China when it established diplomatic relations with South Korea (in 1992). In addition to these capricious contemporary relations, Chinese

and Koreans, North and South, have unsettling historical issues over the ancient Goguryeo Kingdom (a large part of it is in China). Since the onset of the nuclear issue in the early 1990s, North Korea has taken many confrontational positions against the United States and the world community (the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United Nations Security Council in particular). China knows how uncontrollable its North Korean neighbor is and does not want to have an enemy like this on its border. Pang Zhen and Yang Xinyu [庞朕和杨鑫宇], "From Alliance to Partnership: the Evolution of China-North Korea Relations" [从同盟到伙伴：中朝关系的历史演变], *Journal of Chongqing Institute of Socialism* [重庆社会主义研究所学刊], No. 3, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, China's Deputy Foreign Minister Wu Dawei, who was also China's chief negotiator at the Six-Party Talks, already made visits to Moscow, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul in early July 2009. China's effort to resume the Six-Party Talks was already underway.

<sup>5</sup> This term is from Christopher Layne. See his writings about this idea.

<sup>6</sup> "Washington's Farewell Address," 106th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Document No. 106-21, Washington, 2000.