NORTH KOREA REQUIRES LONG-TERM STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S.

Mark P. Barry

Talks between U.S. and North Korean diplomats in New York in early March, on top of the Feb. 13, 2007 agreement in the six-party talks on initial actions for the implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement, represent meaningful progress toward resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, at long last.

Since December 2006, there were three bilateral meetings between U.S. and North Korean delegates in Berlin, as well as talks in Beijing between Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and U.S. Treasury Department officials. These preparations by an election-chastened Bush administration laid much of the groundwork for February’s agreement. The recent talks between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and his North Korean counterpart, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan, are a further step toward normalization of relations between the two countries. The North is anticipated to freeze its nuclear program in mid-April if its funds, frozen in a Macao bank under U.S. pressure, are returned by then (at this writing, technical problems are delaying the funds return).

Clearly, the stage is set within the framework of the six-party talks to resolve an issue that has festered since 1990: ending North Korea’s nuclear program. But it would be a mistake to think that either North Korea has had a “change of heart” or that U.S. financial pressure since October 2005 alone forced the North to make choices it previously could avoid. The real reasons for improvement in the talks have likely been the confluence of North Korea’s ever more difficult geopolitical predicament with long overdue Bush administration recognition of the value of communicating and negotiating directly with the North.

However, U.S. policy can and should be made more effective, within the context of the six-party talks. What is required is a deeper understanding

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of what North Korea really wants and the dynamics of its political culture. If these are properly understood, the North Korean nuclear issue can be resolved much more easily.

In January, an extraordinary commentary appeared in the Washington Post that flew in the face of conventional wisdom about North Korea’s motivations for its behavior. Its authors—Robert Carlin, a former State Department intelligence analyst with considerable experience inside North Korea, and John W. Lewis, a top Stanford University scholar—concur with assessments of Universal Peace Federation representatives familiar with the North. “Above all,” the authors write, North Korea “wants... a long-term, strategic relationship with the United States...It is a cold, hard calculation based on history and the realities of geopolitics as perceived in Pyongyang.” They add, “The North Koreans believe in their gut that they must buffer the heavy influence their neighbors already have, or could soon gain, over their small, weak country.”

For years North Korean propaganda called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the peninsula, but in fact, that is the last thing Pyongyang wants. The writers observe, “Because of their pride and fear of appearing weak...explicitly requesting that the United States stay is one of the most difficult things for the North Koreans to do.”

Evidence indicates North Korea’s top leadership does not wish to remain permanent enemies with the United States. There is a desire to change the adversarial relationship. North Korea has assessed the “colonial” management styles of the United States, China, Russia, and Japan, and concluded that only with the United States would they be able to maintain their status as an independent nation.

Meanwhile, the North’s position on China has changed. It no longer trusts China as a guarantor of its independence. North Korea’s top leaders hold animosity toward China for the way, in their perception, China has used them for their own benefit, including in the six-party talks. Furthermore, the DPRK leadership fears that China considers Kim Jong Il too independent. North Korea does not feel its security is guaranteed in its relationship with China, even though it temporarily accommodates Beijing to sustain its economy.

North Korea perceives it is under enormous pressure from China, with whom it shares an 880 mile border, and fears its days of national indepen-
dence may be numbered. It considers China’s “Northeast Project,” an attempt by scholars to claim that northern Korea historically was part of China, to be a “shot across the bow.” Chinese investment in the DPRK economy has skyrocketed since 2002. While, undeniably, a revived North Korean economy will benefit China’s three Northeast “rust belt” provinces, there is a growing concern that an invigorated DPRK economy could be compelled to integrate into China’s. This would transform North Korea into a client state of China, and deprive the Korean people of the prospect of unification for the foreseeable future.

In principle, the six-party talks are an appropriate format for resolving not only the nuclear issue, but matters related to creating a permanent peninsular peace regime. After all, each of the four major powers bears some responsibility for Korea’s division, or maintaining it. But, as Carlin and Lewis write, the six-party talks are “a microcosm of the strategic world (North Korea) most fears. Three strategic foes—China, Japan and Russia—sit in judgment, apply pressure and (to Pyongyang’s mind) insist on the North’s permanent weakness.”

The U.S. has given astonishing responsibility to China to host the six-party talks on the premise it is the one nation with influence over the North. But this has also bestowed considerable regional prestige to China at the expense of American influence. If the end result of China’s work in the talks eventually were the economic absorption of the North, that would indeed bring long-term stability to the region, a chief American objective, but would also be another historical injustice inflicted upon the Korean people.

A number of American experts on Korean affairs argue that the long-term solution to the North Korea problem is its economic absorption, preferably by South Korea but even by China. The reality is that South Korea has limited economic influence with North Korea at present, despite
its potential; yet, China’s economic leverage over the North is overwhelm-
ing and intimidating.

The problem with U.S. economic and political pressure on the North is that it pushed the DPRK further into the hands of China. Such an ill-advised policy is to the detriment of the Korean people, north and south. Another byproduct would be the further decline of American influence on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia as a whole. It is to the United States’ advantage to have normal relations with both Koreas, just as China main-
tains ties and influence with both. The U.S. should preserve its influence in East Asia for the sake of keeping the balance of power among China, Russia and Japan.

While maintenance of U.S. pressure on North Korea has made sense from a limited perspective, it did not take into account the wider picture and its implications. The U.S. may “win the battle” by successfully circum-
scribing North Korea’s room for maneuver, causing it to make choices it could previously avoid, but it could “lose the war” by placing North Korea into Chinese custody, wittingly or unwittingly, and disengaging from the peninsula. In January, President Bush publicly confirmed his approach when he told the Wall Street Journal that the point of American financial sanctions was “to use the sanctions to get North Korea to give up on its [nuclear] weapons programs.”

While the idea of engaging North Korea may be repugnant to some Americans, it in fact is the best avenue not only to solve the nuclear issue, but to ensure Korean reunification does not become a lost dream. There is a way to effectively engage North Korea: through senior-level engagement, not merely through mid-level bureaucrats with limited authority.

North Korea, for reasons already explained, is very anxious for high-level American visits, especially those carrying the authority of the president. That could be Secretary Condoleezza Rice, James Baker, even former President George Bush, the father. Once trust is built on that level, and in the North Korean public eye, it will bring about attitudinal change, new dynamics and new possibilities for both sides. In the end, we may find North Korea slowly willing to trade the security guarantee of its nuclear weapons for the security guarantee of a strategic friendship with the United States. In this sense, we have before us a historical opportunity with North Korea much like President Nixon had with China.
American insistence on legitimate but simultaneous demands—such as North Korea ceasing criminal activities (counterfeiting, improving human rights, etc.), in addition to dismantling its nuclear program—has been counterproductive, and the North simply dug in its heels. It is easy to see that North Korea’s nuclear test last October was to demonstrate it will not bend to U.S. pressure, and to strengthen its bargaining position. The status of existing nuclear weapons is a new wrinkle that did not exist when the Joint Statement was signed in September 2005. By placing the nuclear issue as the top priority in the context of senior-level engagement and leadership trust-building, the Bush administration is likely to see a major breakthrough with North Korea because of the North’s strategic need to forge strong ties with the United States.

In the end, the United States should take responsibility—in alliance with South Korea and Japan—to ensure the best possible international environment that can lead to Korean unification supported by the four regional powers. A very hopeful sign would be a visit to Pyongyang in the near future by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.