

WebMemo



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Be Wary of North Korea's Charm Offensive

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Pyongyang's latest attempts to re-engage the world have again raised expectations for a resumption of nuclear negotiations or at least a lowering of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. During the past two months, Kim Jong-il or his subordinates have met with all member countries of the six-party talks. Pyongyang has proffered vague promises of progress in denuclearization but has yet to take any tangible actions.

Kim's summit meetings with Russia and China, as well as a new willingness to re-engage with the United States and South Korea, reflect a shift in North Korean policy—though it is one we have seen before. The North Korean ship of state typically veers back and forth between belligerence and engagement, though it always remains on a true course toward achieving long-term objectives. In its typically schizophrenic way, the regime combines diplomatic entreaties with threats, resulting in a charm offensive that is more offensive than charming.

North Korea's latest outreach efforts are correctly being met with greater skepticism by the United States and its allies. Although Washington and Seoul are more willing to engage with Pyongyang, doubts remain about the efficacy of returning to the six-party talks. As is always the case in dealing with the North Korean regime, any progress will be difficult, halting, overshadowed by fears of cheating, and potentially illusory.

From Russia with Skepticism. Kim Jong-il's summit with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev

this week was typically full of diplomatic and economic promises. North Korean diplomatic pledges—usually simply to return to the status quo ante—were given in return for foreign promises of economic largesse. But serious doubts linger about fulfillment of either.

After the Kim–Medvedev summit, headlines blared that Kim had promised a moratorium on his nuclear and missile programs. Yet the Russian spokesman merely stated that “in the course of the [six-party] talks, North Korea will be ready to resolve the question of imposing a moratorium on tests and production of nuclear missile weapons.” Far short of a pledge for unilateral action prior to resuming talks, the bland wording also gives Pyongyang plenty of opportunity to demand concessions during the six-party talks.

Similarly, former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson (D) declared after his December 2010 trip to Pyongyang that the regime had vowed to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to return to the North Korean nuclear facility. Richardson declared, “They will allow IAEA personnel to go to Yongbyon to ensure that they are not processing highly enriched uranium and are

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proceeding with peaceful purposes.” Despite Richardson’s self-aggrandizing visit, Pyongyang never publicly made such a pledge nor carried it out.

During this week’s Russia summit, North Korea reiterated its advocacy for returning to the six-party talks with “no preconditions” to appear more benevolent than the U.S. and South Korean demands. But returning to the talks on North Korea’s terms would enable Pyongyang to move beyond its non-compliance with previous denuclearization commitments and its two unprovoked acts of war against South Korea last year.

Building Momentum for Six-Party Talks?

Despite their lack of substance, the public relations impact of North Korean diplomatic efforts could spur (still glacially slow) movement back to multilateral nuclear negotiations. Pyongyang’s willingness to meet with South Korean officials in Bali last month, reversing an earlier pledge to have nothing to do with the Lee Myung-bak administration, was significant. Similarly, although bilateral U.S.–North Korean talks in New York did not lead to an immediate breakthrough, they may form the basis for additional contact.

The Lee administration subsequently softened its policy toward Pyongyang by de-linking inter-Korean engagement from its previous demand for a formal North Korean apology for its two attacks in 2010. Seoul indicated a willingness to allow movement in humanitarian and nuclear issues even prior to receiving an apology.

The Obama Administration offered \$900,000 in flood relief supplies to Pyongyang, though it is still refraining from a decision on providing large-scale food aid. Hours after Washington’s announcement, North Korea offered to resume bilateral talks on repatriating the remains of U.S. troops killed during the Korean War. Though minor steps, these actions add to speculation that secret meetings with Pyongyang may be underway, such as those that preceded the surprise announcements of the Bali and New York meetings.

North Korea’s diplomatic outreach, however, was undermined by concurrent threats of war in response to annual South Korean–U.S. military exercises and Pyongyang’s seizure of South Korean

assets at the joint inter-Korean Kumgang Mountain tourist venue.

Maintain Allied Preconditions. Whether the United States or South Korea agrees to additional meetings with North Korea should remain dependent on Pyongyang’s actions. Prior to returning to the six-party talks, Washington and Seoul should continue to require that North Korea take tangible steps to resume its denuclearization commitments and abide by U.N. resolutions.

The Obama Administration, in concert with South Korean and Japanese allies, should call on Pyongyang to formally and publicly pledge to:

- Return IAEA inspectors to the Yongbyon nuclear facility;
- Issue a moratorium on any additional long-range missile or nuclear tests;
- Institute a freeze on nuclear activities, including its uranium-enrichment program; and
- Abide by the Armistice and inter-Korean agreements.

Pyongyang should also agree to additional inter-Korean meetings to address South Korean security concerns, including last year’s attacks by North Korea.

If North Korea were to do all of those things, it would fulfill allied preconditions for returning to the six-party talks. We should be clear, however, that a resumption of multilateral nuclear negotiations merely returns the combatants to the ring. None of the participating countries has high hopes for success.

Progress Without False Hope. Pyongyang is driven to its latest iteration of outreach by economic necessities that it perceives can best be fulfilled through diplomatic means. North Korea’s quest for food aid and economic benefits will moderate the regime’s behavior for the near term. Failure to achieve those objectives, however, will lead Pyongyang to resort to provocative actions once again.

Therefore, even as the United States remains open to diplomacy, it must retain sufficient defenses against the multifaceted North Korean security threat. The Obama Administration should affirm

an unequivocal commitment to defending Asian allies by maintaining the threefold U.S. promise of extended deterrence comprised of forward-deployed conventional forces, missile defense, and the nuclear umbrella.

For its part, Congress should fully support ongoing U.S. military realignment plans in South Korea and Japan. These plans include the Yongsan base relocation, land partnership plan, and family hous-

ing for accompanied tours. Planned budget cuts by the Senate Armed Services Committee, including a U.S. Marine Corps air unit on Okinawa, would undermine years of carefully crafted diplomacy that achieved U.S. strategic objectives and resolved contentious issues with allies.

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