

<Current Issue #131>

The Prospect for the Security Situation on the Korea Peninsula during the U.S. Presidential Transition Period: 1994 Again?

Sung-Bae Kim (Senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Strategy)

- I. North Korea's Delist from Terrorist-Sponsoring States: the Submission of the United States?**
 - II. The Dynamic Force of the Development in North-U.S. Relations I: North Korea Does Not Have Enough Time**
 - III. The Dynamic Force of the Development in North-U.S. Relations II: the Policy Climate Favorable to the New U.S. Administration**
 - IV. North, South, and U.S. : Dynamics of a Strategic Triangle Relationship**
 - V. 1994, 2000, and 2009**
-

The situation on the Korean Peninsula has developed in a complicated way ahead of the U.S. regime change. U.S.–North Korea relations have made smooth progress since North Korea was delisted from the terrorist sponsoring countries on October 11, 2008; however, as the North addressed the severance of all inter–Korean relations on October 16, 2008, South Korea has been embroiled in a tense relationship with the North. That is, "the progress of U.S.–North relations—the tightness of South–North relations" is becoming structuralized, and at least ostensibly developing into a similar situation occurring in the period before the 1994 U.S.–North Geneva Agreement. Of course, today's situation differs from that of 1994 in many

ways. Because the multilateral framework of the six-party talks has been employed, the recent structure does not address everything to be determined within the bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the North. Also, the burden of cutting off all South-North relations cannot be compared with the past and is a considerably onerous choice that neither the North nor the South can help making. However, amid the rapidly changing situation on the Korean Peninsula, keeping the tight relations between North and South causes South Korea's policy options to be strongly restricted. That cannot be a welcome issue.

There are divergent opinions about whether such a trend will continue in the future. Although the coexistence of optimism and pessimism about the situation on the Korean Peninsula is constant, optimists and pessimists have recently crossed each other in terms of U.S.-North and inter-Korean relations. Optimists about U.S.-North ties and North Korea's nuclear weapons program tend to be linked to pessimism about the worst relationship between North and South, while pessimists about U.S.-North relations are inclined to connect with optimists about a recovery of the inter-Korean relationship. The divergent views are due to prevailing wishful or partisan thinking rather than an accurate diagnosis. The contradictory assessments of the recent U.S.-North nuclear declaration verification agreement and North Korea's delist from the terrorist-supporting states can be understood in such a context.

I. North Korea's Delist from Terrorist-Sponsoring States: the Submission of the United States?

The positive and negative assessments on the U.S.-North nuclear verification and North Korea's removal from terrorist-supporting states indeed coexist. In the negative view, some experts think that the Bush administration surrendered to North Korea's blackmail diplomacy again. Also, North Korea's delisting is deemed as a "bribe" by the United States. That is, the agreement that excludes the verification of undeclared uranium enrichment facilities results from incomplete and unsuccessful negotiations. As its background, the Bush administration's concern is that its only diplomatic achievement returns to its starting point before the end of Bush's term. Here, the U.S. government seems to be pushing an imperfect agreement.

On the other hand, some progress on the nuclear issue has meaning

via the U.S.–North verification agreement even though there remain inspections for undeclared nuclear facilities. Notably, as North Korea's delisting serves as a catalyst to improve North–U.S. relations, the future nuclear negotiation is expected to develop actively.

It is obvious that the North–U.S. nuclear game is unfavorable for the United States. If the North restores its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and returns to the strained situation, the Bush administration cannot escape criticism that it leaves North Korea to produce nuclear weapons and conduct nuclear tests. Also, the U.S. national intelligence agencies stated with confidence that North Korea had the uranium enrichment program (UEP); yet, it remains controversial whether the U.S. seizes credible evidence on some considerable production of the UEP. If North Korean nuclear issues return to the starting point, the Bush administration's negotiators would be summoned to a hearing and blamed for the failure of North Korea policy. This is the direct and phenomenal reason for why the Bush administration endured criticism within the U.S. and struck a bargain with North Korea.

However, it is excessively underestimated that the recent agreement is simply the result of surrendering to North Korea's blackmail diplomacy. In the 15-year history of North Korean nuclear issues, this is the first verification process based on a declaration of nuclear weapons program submitted by the North. Even if the UEP and denuclearization can be ultimately settled, the most urgent problem is to inspect and remove the exact amount of plutonium. In this regard, if the verification of the reported facilities is accomplished accurately, meaningful progress can be made. In particular, the restoration of the disablement process seems to have deep significance according to the February 13 agreement, even if the Geneva agreement is more favorable to North Korea. In return for a declaration of North Korea's nuclear program and the closure of its nuclear facilities, the North will be provided with 1,000,000 tons of heavy oil on a one-time basis. Thus, North Korea is likely to make progress in the denuclearization process in order to continue receiving energy and economic aid. More importantly, the Yongbyon nuclear facilities become increasingly useless as time passes. Despite the imperfect verification, it has been evaluated that North Korea's removal from the terrorist states list is valuable and warranted in exchange for the return to the February 13 agreement system.

Washington's assessments are divergent according to political

positions. Influential neocons issuing uranium enrichment made an extremely negative evaluation; yet, Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama's response is slightly different from Republican candidate John McCain. However, there has recently been some consensus among experts that the verification agreements actually evitable. Japan is in a defiant rage, but Seoul's inside circumstances are even more complicated. Even though the rapid development of North-U.S. relations in the six-party talks is ostensibly welcomed, Seoul feels burdened under the strained relations between South and North.

It is interesting that the future prospects for North-U.S. and inter-Korean relations are slightly divergent depending on assessments of the verification agreement. In a negative view, the North Korean nuclear issue is expected to encounter additional difficulty because of the seemingly temporized agreement and North Korea's uncertain willingness to abandon its nuclear programs. Moreover, in the negative analysis, North Korea's intention to communicate only with the U.S. and block relations with South will not succeed in the end. The hard line that the North has taken toward the South cannot persist over time. On the other hand, in a positive point of view, North Korea's removal from the terrorism blacklist likely will cause North-U.S. relations to make significant progress. Also, the North's attitude toward the South is more rigid as long as the South does not change its North Korea policy. Such difference, as mentioned above, strongly reflects partisan positions. In my opinion, the prospect for U.S.-North relations is bright. The long-term ties between South and North are optimistic as well. The reason for this is that a dynamic force of the improvement in North-U.S. relations definitely exists, and the dynamics of a strategic triangle among the North, the South, and the U.S. is likely to be operating.

II. The Dynamic Force of the Development in North-U.S. Relations I: North Korea Does Not Have Enough Time

The dynamic force of the advancement in North-U.S. relations stems from North Korea. Even if the North has pursued diplomatic ties with the U.S. on the condition of securing North Korean regime, it is expected to attempt the "big deal" toward the new U.S. government. North Korea has regretted failing to build a treaty of amity with the U.S. at the end of the Clinton

administration. Because Democratic presidential candidate Obama stated that he would meet with North Korea's leader Jong-il Kim, this can be a substantial opportunity for the North.

North Korea must become determined to dismantle its nuclear weapons in order to try the "big deal" with the new U.S. administration. There are several skeptical views on whether the North will truly abandon its nuclear program. Particularly, it is reasonable that North will not give up its nuclear weapons that physically embody its political system. However, the outdated nuclear facilities cannot yield a nuclear material any longer. Also, considerably advanced technology and accumulated data are necessary to make already secured fissile material stocks and nuclear weapons capable for actual fighting. For this reason, putting them on sale can be advantageous to North when it can sell them at a high price.

Recently, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's illness has become a key factor to hasten nuclear negotiations. He becomes increasingly impatient at his succession by stabilizing the North Korean regime. In the case of former leader Kim Il-sung, he took an unusually positive attitude toward the U.S. and South Korea before he died. Furthermore, because the centennial anniversary of North Korean independent chronological era is coming up in 2012, this is another optimistic factor to carry on nuclear negotiations. The Kim Jong-il regime desperately needs to achieve economic development and to resolve energy issues via North-U.S. diplomatic ties.

In my analysis, such factors will force North Korea to push actively for nuclear negotiations with the U.S. Yet, if the new U.S. administration is not particularly interested in North Korean nuclear issues or slowly implements the verification agreement, the nuclear crisis is likely to increase temporarily. North Korea might stop dismantling nuclear weapons and restore Yongbyon's uranium enrichment facilities or reprocess the fuel waste which is produced in the process of nuclear disablement. Also, the North would launch a long-range ballistic missile and conduct a second nuclear test. However, the probability of nuclear crisis can be interpreted as a sign that the North will hasten nuclear negotiations with the U.S. In particular, North Korea made the verification declaration agreement with the Bush government. Its intention is to remove the entry barrier to the 3-stage denuclearization process and to gain benefits from North Korea's removal from the terrorism blacklist. Thus, the North is likely preparing to promote the "big deal" with the Obama

administration by easing the burden of the nuclear verification. In my opinion, the scenario of active negotiation is more likely to happen than that of nuclear crisis.

III. The Dynamic Force of the Development in North-U.S. Relations II: the Policy Climate Favorable to the New U.S. Administration

It is expected that the new U.S. administration will influence the dynamic force of the progress in North-U.S. relations. Whoever wins a presidential election is hard to entirely negate the Bush administration's policy toward North Korea. Recently, the White House has conducted a briefing on North Korean nuclear issues to both Democratic and Republic presidential candidates. It is predicted that the Bush government conveys the entire aspects of bilateral North-U.S. negotiations, including references to Singapore and Pyongyang agreements. This aims at continuity in the U.S. administration's policy toward North Korean nuclear weapons program.

The multilateral system called the six-party talks seems to guarantee consistent U.S. policy toward North Korea nuclear issues. The new U.S. administration cannot rescind the agreement made in the six-party talks. The nuclear verification agreement might be facing some rough going in the process of adopting the document in the six-nation talks. Yet, the Bush administration is in no position to look to left or right. Even if Japan strongly resists and the South checks the agreement, it can be anticipated that the initiative will push ahead in an American way. Thus, the new U.S. administration can start bargaining for nuclear disablement with North Korea from the last phase of the 3-stage denuclearization process.

Nuclear negotiations and the progress in North-U.S. relations are optimistic signs that the next administration will have more resources available than did the Bush administration. First, the new U.S. government will be relatively free from the HEU issue, which fostered the second North Korean nuclear crisis. In other words, unlike the Bush administration, the HEU does not become a decisive obstacle to settle the North Korean nuclear weapons program. The Bush administration could not avoid the HEU issue, so it had to use novel ideas, such as the confidential minute, which was a key factor of the Singapore agreement. In particular, if it is revealed that U.S. national intelligence overstated the uranium enrichment program and the HEU is a less

urgent matter in U.S. Congress, then the new Obama administration does not need to be concerned about the HEU issue.

The provision of a light-water reactor, according to the September 19 joint statement, can be a useful means to make North Korea disable its nuclear weapons. The Bush administration has stopped constructing the light-water reactor by regarding the Geneva agreement as a mistake. However, most experts point out that the abolition of North Korean nuclear weapons cannot be achieved without North-U.S. diplomatic ties as well as the supply of a light-water reactor. In the third phrase of the denuclearization process, the next administration is likely to use the light-water reactor as a bargaining chip.

This year the House and Senate elections will take place at the same time. A political party which wins the presidential election likely takes over the House. The Democratic Party has already taken the reins of the Senate. If Democratic presidential candidate Obama is elected, and the party seizes the House, the split government seems not to emerge. The new administration can strongly assert its North Korea policy. Definitely, favorable conditions for nuclear negotiations and the progress in North-U.S. relations will take shape.

IV. North, South, and U.S.: Dynamics of a Strategic Triangle Relationship

The strategic dynamics of triangular relations among North, South, and U.S. can be seen through past processes. First, the improvement in inter-Korean relations has a relatively positive influence on North-U.S. ties. Also, enhanced relations between North and U.S., even if its delayed effect takes place, tend to spill over to inter-Korean relations after all. On the other hand, if inter-Korean and North-U.S. ties make rapid progress, South-U.S. relations may become complicated. In 2000, the North-South summit rapidly improved inter-Korean relations as well as those between the North and the U.S. Under the Bush administration, development of South-North relations has not guaranteed North-U.S. ties, but at least they have played a role in preventing a decline in the relationship between the North and the U.S.

In the case of strained relations between South and North, the progress in North-U.S. ties results in a recovery of inter-Korean relations. In early 1994, North Korea threatened to turn Seoul into a sea of fire; yet, as

former president Jimmy Carter made a visit to North Korea, the big deal between North and U.S. could be achieved. The North Korean leader's proposal for the summit yielded a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. In 2006, dialogue between inter-Korean authorities was blocked completely because North Korea launched a missile and resumed its nuclear tests; however, after the North-U.S. meeting in Berlin and the February 13 agreement, the second inter-Korean summit was held. This put South-U.S. ties in a delicate situation. In the process of adopting the 1994 Geneva agreement, high-level meetings between the North and the U.S. were often held while South-U.S. ties were placed in an uncomfortable situation.

Since North Korea's removal from the list of terrorist-sponsoring states, inter-Korean relations have been strained whereas the North is likely to make progress with the U.S. According to the historical experiences mentioned previously, the North seems only to communicate with the U.S. while it persists in holding at bay its relations with the South. Of course, the improvement in North-U.S. ties can temporarily affect the tension between South and North. Because of economic and political benefits from the U.S., the demand for inter-Korean relations diminishes relatively. It is expected that the United States will continue food aids and provide economic and energy support depending on the result of the six-party talks. Thus, the North can reduce its request for South Korea's humanitarian assistance and South-North business cooperation. Since the Lee Myung-bak administration came to power, North and South has competed for a dominant position on the Korean Peninsula; however, North Korea seems not to change its hostile attitude toward the South.

Considering the dynamics of strategic triangle relations among North, South, and U.S., progress in North-U.S. relations is expected to positively affect inter-Korean ties after all. That is, if the development in North-U.S. relations passes through some points, North likely will take a flexible stand on inter-Korean relations. Thus, once the South properly maintains a relationship with the North and quietly bides its time, a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations can unexpectedly be achieved. For such a situation, an imperative step is to prevent any additional moves to aggravate South-North relations.

Recently, North Korea has shown its aggressive response insomuch as having made a statement that inter-Korean relations were completely broken off. The North has doubted whether the Lee Myung-bak administration

considers the idea of reunification through absorption. In a word, there is a lack of trust between North and South. In South Korea, rumors of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's illness have been spreading. Some South Korean civic groups have distributed leaflets about North Korea's miserable situations. The North believes that such events intend to request its regime change. The implementation of the June 15 and October 4 joint declarations is likely to call for respect of North Korea's system rather than the operation of specific business. Thus, the Lee Myung-bak government should prevent unnecessary issues that will provoke the North and appeal instead for inter-Korean coexistence and mutual prosperity by consistently conveying its intention not to pursue reunification through adaptation or North Korean regime change. In 1994, when South Korea tried to interrupt enhanced relations between North and U.S. with impatience, both inter-Korean and North-U.S. relationships took a turn for the worse. We need to ruminate on the lessons of the past.

V. 1994, 2000, and 2009

North Korea's nuclear weapons issue originated from the Cold War and the division of the Korean Peninsula. Whether North Korea's nuclear program is intended for negotiation with the U.S. or for an armament to protect its regime results from a state of war between North Korea and the U.S. as well as South-North military standoff. Thus, in the 1970s, the nuclear development under the Park Jung-hee government was designed to deal with North Korea's threat to the South Korean regime. Even though the North Korean nuclear weapons program cannot be comparable to the Park regime's nuclear issue, the two problems engaged in and targeted the United States. In return for South Korea's nuclear dismantlement, the Park regime gained reassurance about the long-term presence of U.S. troops and the South Korea-U.S. defense treaty.

In the U.S. presidential transition period, progress in North-U.S. relations is a prerequisite for denuclearization. Fortunately, the recent verification agreement might lead to North-U.S. negotiations and the improvement in North-U.S. relations under the new government. In particular, given the recent election of Barack Obama, North-U.S. relations may make rapid progress. However, not only does Obama have inexperience in foreign affairs, but he must also deal with national issues regarding the recent financial crisis. For this reason, Democratic vice Presidential candidate Joe

Biden might be committed to carry out foreign policy. Biden has understood North Korea's nuclear weapons program because he attempted to visit North Korea several times. The new administration is expected to take a significant step forward in North-U.S. relations.

Beginning next year, the 3-stage nuclear negotiations over denuclearization, diplomatic ties between North Korea and the U.S., a peace accord, and other developments will be a kind of "big deal" game. As a result, a North-U.S. military summit can be held. It is possible to adopt a second Korea-U.S. joint communique via high-level talks. The negotiable situations having occurred in late 2000 can be retrieved in 2009. Obviously, it is required that North Korea responds to the bargains being made for nuclear dismantlement.

Some experts are concerned about the reemergence of the 1994 situations in which improvement in North-U.S. relations estranged the South from the North. Recently, inter-Korean relations have been worsening while the North has advanced bilateral relations with the U.S. Nevertheless, such current circumstances can lead to the recurrence of the North-U.S. "big deal" and agreements on inter-Korean summit meetings in the past.