Opportunities and Obstacles: Revelations From a Dialogue With North Korea

By Chung-in Moon

In the absence of normalized relations between the US and North Korea, so-called “Track Two” dialogue plays a key role in the relationship. From March 7 to 9, North Korea’s chief nuclear envoy, Vice Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, made a rare visit to New York for a conference that illustrated both the opportunities for and obstacles to rapprochement between Pyongyang and Washington. Ri attended in the capacity of “consultant to the Institute for Disarmament and Peace” to satisfy the provisions of a Track Two meeting.

Convened by Syracuse University’s Maxwell School and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the conference involved about 50 participants from nations included in the Six-Party talks plus two others, Germany and Mongolia. The senior US official in attendance was Senator John Kerry, joined by former officials Henry Kissinger, James Steinberg and Donald Gregg. Seoul dispatched chief nuclear envoy Sung-nam Lim at the last moment to join the South Korean delegation, which comprised National Assemblymen Hak-kyu Sohn and Choong-hwan Kim, former unification minister Dong-won Lim, scholars Nak-chung Paik and Chung-min Lee and myself. There were seven representatives from North Korea, and prominent figures representing China, Japan, Russia, Germany, and Mongolia.

The official topics for discussion revolved around peace, security and co-operation in Northeast Asia, with special sessions on learning from German and European experiences, and the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in confidence building. One noticeable absence in the conversation was mention of the Six-Party talks.

The conference’s most remarkable feature was the North Koreans’ eagerness, to the point of desperation, in pushing for normalization with the US, and the implication that Kim Jong Un might be behind it. The overall message from the North Korean delegation was clear: The top priority of Pyongyang’s “new diplomacy under new leadership” is improving ties with Washington. We would even consider an alliance with the US if the US provides us with a nuclear umbrella. We would even consider an alliance with the US if the US provides us with a nuclear umbrella.

Facing this push from the North Korean delegation for an improvement in ties, the American response was cold and firm. Key messages included the following:

• “Unlike past generations, the new leadership in North Korea does not want to fight the US. It wants peace.”

• “The US portrays North Korea as a rogue state, a criminal state and a member of an Axis of Evil. For us, the threat from the US is real. And the lesson we have learned is that improvements in DPRK-US relations are virtually impossible without a change in Americans’ basic mindset.”

• “There are only four countries — Bhutan, Cuba, Iran and North Korea — with which the US does not have diplomatic ties. Bhutan has refused ties to the US, while Iran and Cuba were diplomatically recognized but later diplomatic ties were severed. But the US has never recognized North Korea. No chance was given to us. The US is punishing us not because of WMD and terrorism, but because of political and ideological differences. This is unfair.”

• “The American formula of ‘North Korea denuclearizes first, then we will engage in dialogue and normalization’ has not worked. A new formula should be sought. America is the great power, whereas the DPRK is a small country. It is very difficult for a small country like us to undertake proactive actions because they can be seen as signs of weakness that would trigger provocative behavior from strong countries. Can’t the US take steps first, actions such as the removal of hostile intent and policy, lifting of sanctions, normalization of relations and transformation of the armistice agreement into a viable peace treaty? If the US undertakes such proactive measures, then the North Korean nuclear issue, both horizontal and vertical proliferation, will be automatically resolved.”

• “We are more than willing to give up nuclear weapons if the US provides us with a nuclear umbrella. We would even consider an alliance with the US. What we need from the US is security assurance.”

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