The Debate

Testing Intentions: Two Viewpoints on US Strategy Toward North Korea

By Robert Carlin

The US position on conditions for resuming nuclear weapons negotiations with North Korea have failed repeatedly to break the deadlock in the Six-Party Talks. But there are precedents for reading offers by North Korea to restart talks. In Pyongyang’s latest offer, the US failed to properly read the signals North Korea was sending.

By Bruce Klingner

The US should treat with great caution North Korean offers to resume negotiations over its nuclear weapons program, because the country often offers concessions that it’s not actually entitled to offer, given the position the United Nations Security Council has taken. So, the concessions are essentially empty.
Respond Cautiously to North Korean Offers
By Bruce Klingner

LIKE SO MANY years before, 2015 dawned with yet more perceived “signals” of North Korea’s supposed desire to resurrect diplomacy with the United States and South Korea and predictions of another inter-Korean summit. Pyongyang’s offer to refrain from nuclear tests in return for a freeze on allied military exercises was quickly — and correctly — rejected. The regime subsequently added more and more preconditions, ultimately rejecting the possibility of talks with either Washington or Seoul.

By late February, hopes of improved inter-Korean relations and a diplomatic resolution to the North Korean nuclear problem again had dissolved. On the eve of the annual US-South Korea military exercises, Pyongyang abandoned its charm offensive and threatened to wage a “merciless, sacred war” against the US.

OFFERING WHAT IT DOESN’T HAVE
Pyongyang’s “nukes-for-military-exercise” offer was not a legitimate proposal since it attempted to “sell” something it doesn’t legally possess. Numerous UN Security Council resolutions preclude North Korea from conducting any nuclear or ballistic missile tests.

A true measure of the invalidity of Pyongyang’s offer was that if the deal were rejected and both sides proceeded, only North Korea would again be in open defiance and violation of Security Council resolutions. The regime claimed its proposal was aimed at reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. But it would be far more effective if Pyongyang stopped insulting US and South Korean leaders, curtailed its threats of conventional and nuclear attacks, affirmed its return to the existing armistice and declared its commitment to abide by its Six Party Talks commitments as well as UN resolutions.

CONDITIONAL “UNCONDITIONAL” OFFERS
In his New Year’s Day speech, Kim Jong Un declared it was possible to resume suspended high-level contacts, improve inter-Korean relations and even hold a summit meeting with Seoul. Yet, the speech contained a clear prerequisite: the US and South Korea would have to end their combined military exercises, which Kim labeled the “root cause of the escalating tension on the Peninsula and the danger of nuclear war facing our nation.”

Pyongyang subsequently made its offer of dialogue also contingent on Seoul preventing its citizens from sending leaflets into North Korea and revoking sanctions imposed after Pyongyang sank a South Korean naval ship in 2010, killing 46 sailors. In typical fashion, the North Korean National Defense Commission threatened to “deliver ruthless punishment” if its demands were not met and even warned Seoul not to “criticize” Pyongyang’s proposals for dialogue.

Then the regime shut the door on dialogue. Kim Jong Un declared, “We are unwilling to sit down with mad dogs anymore who keep howling that they are going to use the method of change to bring down our socialist system.” The National Defense Commission avowed, “It is the decision of the army and people of the DPRK to no longer have the need or willingness to sit at the negotiating table with the US. It is only too apparent that no major change or transformation could be achieved in inter-Korean relations even if we were to sit down a thousand times with such government officials.”

A TREASURE, NOT A BARGAINING CHIP
Through words and actions, North Korea has made clear that it has no intention of abandoning the nuclear weapons programs it has pursued for 60 years. Not long ago, many experts blamed the George W. Bush administration for the North Korean nuclear impasse, but Pyongyang’s equally obstreperous behavior toward Barack Obama — including nuclear and missile tests despite US offers of engagement — have resulted in a belated epiphany: blame for the North Korean nuclear problem lies squarely with the regime itself.

Pyongyang asserts that its nuclear weapons are in response to the US “hostile policy” and nuclear threat, declaring the Six Party Talks “null and void.” The regime has an instaillable list of demands for US security reassurances, including removing American troops from South Korea, abrogating the bilateral defense treaty and ending the extended deterrence guarantee.

After repeated public refusals to abandon its nuclear arsenal, North Korea even revised its constitution to enshrine itself as a nuclear power. Kim Jong Un has now proclaimed nuclear weapons to be essential to his country’s security and economic well-being. “Our nuclear armed forces serve as a reliable war deterrent and as a guarantee for defending the sovereignty of the nation, Peace, and wealth and prosperity, as well as the people’s happy lives, rest upon powerful nuclear armed forces,” he asserted.

AN UNBRIDGEABLE GAP?
North Korea’s extensive demands for security assurances and proof of US non-hostile intent transcend the parameters of the Six Party Talks agreements and what Washington would be willing to consider. Pyongyang indicated that allied offers of economic and energy assistance cannot provide the requisite security assurances to induce the regime to denuclearize. Since North Korean nuclear weapons are supposedly made necessary by the US “nuclear threat,” no South Korean offers of security measures and economic assistance can persuade Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs.

While the US should always remain open to diplomacy — based on principles of conditionality, transparency, and reciprocity — such efforts should be part of an integrated, comprehensive strategy that includes fully enforcing US laws and ensuring sufficient defenses against the multi-faceted North Korean military threat.

Nor should Washington go down the bottomless rabbit hole of offering concessions to “improve the negotiating atmosphere.” After all, the US and South Korea have not repeatedly violated Security Council resolutions, conducted military attacks leading to loss of life and habitually threatened the government and populace of its opponent. That behavior has been the province of Pyongyang.

North Korea may be willing to talk… but not about what the US wants to talk about, which is the denuclearization required by both UN resolutions and what Pyongyang has already committed to do several times. As for assertions that North Korea will continue augmenting its nuclear arsenal if the US doesn’t negotiate — Pyongyang also continued building nuclear weapons during earlier periods of negotiation and even after it signed numerous agreements not to do so.

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