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Viewpoint: What is Washington's Next Move on North Korea?

Why the Obama Administration needs a new platform for the U.S. diplomatic strategy to counter North Korea's brinkmanship

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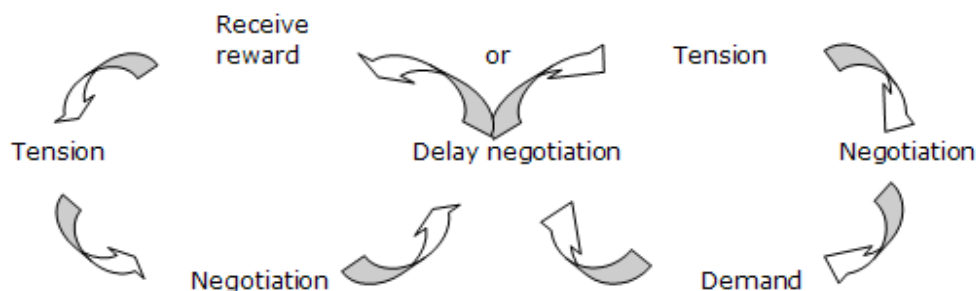
by Sehun Cheon

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Introduction

Was Pyongyang's launch of a long-range missile on April 5, 2009, regardless of whether it was a rocket carrying a communication satellite or an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a shocking event? It surely appeared a shock to the public, but Washington shouldn't have been taken aback by it. If the Obama Administration already perceives how the two prior Administrations mistakenly dealt with North Korea's provocative actions, then this event should come as no surprise at all. If not however, the Obama Administration could repeat the same mistakes as the Clinton and Bush Administrations.

At this time, the Obama Administration should first understand the nature of North Korea's brinkmanship. From past events, the North's actions have shown a dual-cyclical pattern of certain steps: tension, negotiation, demand, delay negotiation, receive reward, then repeating the same cycle.

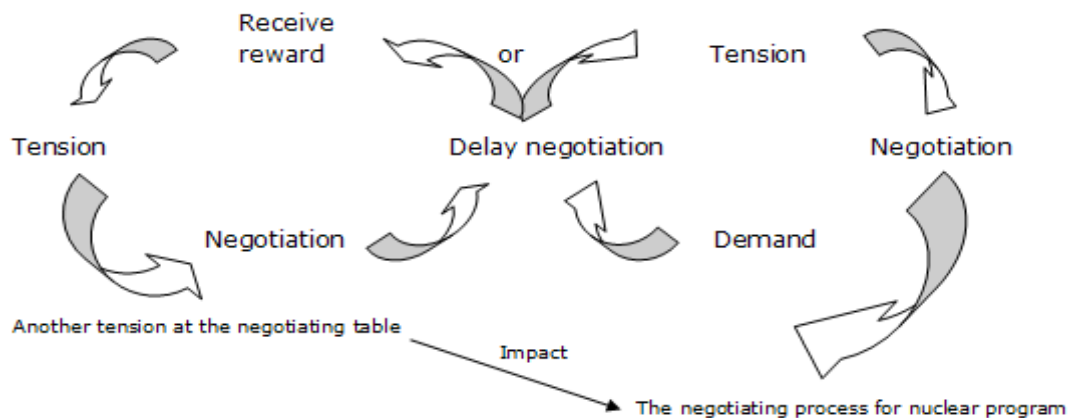


From this perspective, North Korea's brinkmanship always succeeds in igniting tension in the international community, and at the same time becomes a useful tactic to pursue rewards in exchange for the acceptance of the U.S.-North Korea agreements. However, these agreements have been the only way for Pyongyang to earn sufficient time for achieving its ambitions: in the

final analysis, Kim's regime views nuclear weapons and a long-range missile program as a necessity.

In 1993, when North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), tension on the Korean Peninsula escalated rapidly. Washington and Pyongyang, however, soon resumed the talks and drew up the 1994 Agreed Framework, which rewarded the North in various ways. However, North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006, verified by the U.S. as a successful test. Eventually, the North found it had only gains without incurring any loss.

An even worse crisis was the 1998 Taepo Dong-1 missile launch, although North Korea claimed it was a civilian satellite. It is apparent that Pyongyang strategically employed a dual cyclical pattern to achieve its two ambitions. While Washington and Pyongyang were negotiating the agreements, including the complete shutdown of its nuclear program, another ambition of the North, to obtain long-range missile technology, raised tensions and forced Washington and Seoul to accept Pyongyang's demands in exchange for giving up its nuclear program.



Strategically, Pyongyang was attempting to minimize the negative repercussions of another provocative action by characterizing the missile launch as a civilian satellite. At the same time, North Korea also calculated that China and Russia could use this obfuscation to prevent a strong U.N. Security Council response. As a result, its provocative actions moved along to the "Delay negotiation" stage, where again the North would enjoy much time to achieve its ambitions covertly.

So what should the Obama Administration do about this recent North Korean ballistic missile launch, and its subsequent second successful nuclear test? Should his Administration keep appealing to the U.N Security Council to draw a hard-line stance? Should it restart the Six Party Talks aimed at ending North Korea's ambitions? These options may eventually be necessary for President Obama to decide in order to deal with the North's action; but his Administration first needs to reshape its strategy to counter North Korea's brinkmanship before determining whether the two existing options synchronize with his options or not.

Then how is the U.S. strategy to be reshaped? First, what the Bush Administration had mistakenly responded to the North's Highly-Enriched-Uranium (HEU) program at the very early stage of negotiations with a hasty decision to harden its stance against talking with Pyongyang although most U.S. allies were encouraging a diplomatic solution. If the Bush Administration had expected the North would not take any further provocative action if its regime felt secure—even as North Korea's ambitions slowly advanced. In other words, Bush's strong rhetoric was perceived by Pyongyang as a big chance to speed up its HEU program. Pyongyang might have

waited to take the chance because it already had an insight into the Bush Administration's foreign policy. Thus, the current Administration should not stir up Kim's regime so as to slacken its ambitions.

Second, consider the adage, "We know less about you, but you do not know what we know." In the late 1990s, the Clinton Administration knew that North Korea had imported suspicious items that could be used for a HEU program. But that had not been revealed to the public until October 2002. The revelation thus killed the 1994 Agreed Framework, and the North re-opened its plutonium production facilities. Although the revelation of such evidence can be necessary to obtain public support for taking action, the timing of a such a revelation is very important. What if Washington's evidence at that time had not been shown to the public? Even if there was never be a true end to the North's nuclear ambitions, at least its successful 2006 nuclear test would not have so suddenly occurred. As mentioned above, the "Delay negotiation" stage of the dual-cyclical pattern is a critical period during which North Korea can earn some extra time to advance its program.

Third, President Obama should have a serious dialogue with Russia and China about dealing with Kim's regime, while he continues to extend the hand of negotiation to Pyongyang. As such, the 2006 nuclear test and the more recent missile launch and second nuclear test reveal how Russia and China respond to the North's actions. These two powerful nations will play a crucial role in dealing with the North's further actions.

All these considerations should help the United States implement a new diplomatic strategy to counter North Korea's brinkmanship. Its ambitions are not likely "magic flowers." Kim's regime would also not expect that its goals will be achieved by magic. His regime's "secrecy" and "cruel internal pressure" on North Koreans only create tensions in the world. We thus need break down these two ingredients in North Korea's use of brinkmanship.

About the Author

Sehun Cheon is a doctoral candidate in Politics at the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. A former G-3 assistant officer (O2) at the U.S.- R.O.K Combined Forces Command (2001-2002), Sehun Cheon served as a research assistant at the Triangle Institute for Security Studies at Duke University, North Carolina (2003 -2004).

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