

NZIIA-KOREA ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION  
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Current situation on the Korean Peninsula and initiatives to create space for mutual recognition and respect

The comprehensive Joint Statement of September 19 2005 issued on the conclusion of the fourth round of Six-Party Talks, was regarded as being transformative to the cause of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. But that aspiration was soon dashed. No talks have taken place for seven years, North Korea's nuclear capability has been enhanced, and the DPRK has proved impervious to the ever-tougher sanctions imposed by the international community. Isolation seems not to have unduly concerned Pyongyang. Indeed it could be said that helps to keep at bay external influences that might be considered detrimental.

How then can we break through what seems an impenetrable impasse to ease tensions across the DMZ and ultimately realise the goal of elevating the Armistice to a peace treaty? I would argue that there is a way forward but that it would require a radical change in approach.

The DPRK's bottom line is regime survival. Pyongyang appears convinced that a nuclear weapons capability is intrinsic to deterring the United States from trying to orchestrate the toppling of the regime, even though Washington has emphatically ruled that out.

It is difficult to envisage the DPRK agreeing to a resumption of the Six-Party Talks process should other Parties continue to insist that the DPRK must commit to the abandonment of its nuclear weapons programme before another round of talks takes place. That is a desirable stipulation. Many in the international community are keen to see a complete ban on nuclear weapons. But desirable or not it takes us no further forward. It does not break the cycle of recrimination characterised by periods of escalating tension. And unless very carefully managed tensions can quickly turn into crises.

If talks are to have any chance of succeeding it will be necessary to alleviate the DPRK's security concerns, however misguided they may appear to others. What is needed is to find a creative means of appealing to the DPRK's self-reliance philosophy that is the country's driving force.

Dropping the pre-condition that the DPRK commit to abandoning its nuclear weapons programme before the Six-Party talks can resume may be the key to getting the DPRK back to the table. The approach I advocate envisages taking this step however unpalatable it might seem; but with the proviso that Pyongyang defer any plans to conduct another nuclear test, suspend testing of ballistic missiles and stop threatening other Parties with a nuclear attack.

If the DPRK is prepared to give such undertakings this would create an opportunity for the United States once again to reaffirm that it has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK. The United States might then offer to provide a security guarantee to that effect and work to normalise ties as it had agreed to do in the Joint Statement issued at the end of the 2005 Six-Party talks.

Either within the framework of the Six-Party Talks, or jointly, I would then like to see China and the United States convene a meeting to examine ways of helping the DPRK re-build its economy through carefully targeted investment and economic assistance.

It would be necessary to do this in such a way that it does not carry the heavy baggage of dependency in the North Korean mind-set. The aim would be to give the DPRK confidence that it can build an economic model that would improve the welfare of its citizens and over time diminish the importance to the North of reliance on its nuclear weapons capability.

It would have another very important consequence of reducing the overall cost of eventual unification. And it might mitigate the risk of regime implosion leading to a massive refugee outflow which would place further pressure on an international community already reeling from the refugee crisis created by the turmoil in the Middle East.

Given the many complex issues confronting the North-east Asian region, a case could also be made should it be possible to resume the Six-Party Talks for re-shaping those talks into a North-east Asia security dialogue. It is a concept much discussed but never implemented. Encouraging the DPRK to participate in such a dialogue would give it a stake in attempts to resolve strategic issues. That would require a sea change in Pyongyang's approach to the region, but it is a goal worth considering.

There can be no guarantees that these ideas would work in practice. There will be significant discomfort about parking the nuclear issue for the time being. But there are mounting risks from adhering to the status quo.

Unless we help North Korea to help itself the risk is that tension could quickly escalate to conflict whether the result of calculation or miscalculation. That would have profound consequences for the whole Asia-Pacific community.

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