

**The Korean Peninsula – Slow Progress
Toward Peace Continues**

By

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For

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Prospects of a durable peace in Northeast Asia took two half steps forward on October 3 and 4, 2007. First, the six parties (China, Japan, North and South Korea, Russia and the United States) signed another joint statement on October 3. It outlines the next steps North Korea has agreed to take toward ending its nuclear weapons program. The next day the leaders of South and North Korea issued a joint “peace declaration” that sets forth a series of joint projects the two Koreas intend to take toward national reconciliation.

All of this is very good news for the nations of Northeast Asia and the United States and Russia. It further confirms that North Korea increasingly prefers to pursue peace and reconciliation rather than confrontation and possible war to ensure its national security and to promote its economic development. This improves prospects for stability on the Korean Peninsula which is vital for sustaining prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Two “Half Steps” Better than None

The two joint statements, however, are best described as “half steps forward.” They move matters toward peace and stability, but fall short of achieving substantive progress. Both set forth what the concerned parties wish to achieve, but in the Six Party accord, future progress is linked to the exchange of concessions between several of the concerned parties. If the exchange of concessions falters, so too will progress toward implementation, sparking a rise in regional tensions. Nevertheless, it is better to have all the concerned parties moving toward progress rather than squabbling over the future, as was the case between the two Koreas and the four superpowers during the previous half century.

The Six Party Talks’ October 3 Joint Statement

The most important accomplishment of this accord is that it continues the Six Party Talks process. Failure to agree on a joint statement could have jeopardized the talk’s future, a very unhelpful development. Instead, the parties reconfirmed what they had previously agreed to accomplish in the September 19, 2005 and February 13, 2007 joint statements. North Korea again promised to “disable” by the end of 2007 three of its key nuclear facilities: 32 year old 5 megawatt nuclear reactor, 16 year old reprocessing plant, and nuclear fuel fabrication plant.

Of greater significance is what North Korea did not agree to do. We still do not know precisely what “disablement” means. North Korea has agreed to declare “all its nuclear programs in accordance with previous accords,” but this leaves unsettled two key issues:

- how will North Korea’s declaration be verified, and
- will North Korea finally admit that it has a highly enriched uranium program – something it has never admitted.

Japan’s Success

The October 3 agreement’s most important accomplishment has been largely ignored. For the first time, North Korea in a joint statement of the Six Party Talks (Part II) has agreed to take “specific actions” toward “expeditiously” normalizing relations with Japan. This would require resolution of the abduction issue. In the same section of the accord, the United States affirms that it will eventually drop North Korea from its “terrorism list.” In this regard, the accord’s wording is very precise. Referring to the removal of North Korea from the “terrorism list,” and ending the Trading with the Enemy Act economic sanctions, the United States confirms that it will:

fulfill its commitments to the DPRK in parallel with the DPRK’s actions based on consensus reached at the (early September) meeting of the Working Group on Normalization of DPRK-U.S. Relations.

Not stated in the accord are the three preconditions that the United States told North Korea at their early September talks in Geneva it must fulfill before the U.S. will fulfill its promise:

1. publicly accept responsibility for bombing the Korean Airline flight 878 in 1987,
2. release the Japanese Red Army (Yodo Faction), which North Korea has given safe haven since it committed several acts of terrorism in the 1970s, to Japanese authorities for prosecution of their alleged crimes, and
3. agree to a joint Japan-North Korea investigation of the Japanese abduction cases.

All or Nothing

In short, successful implementation of the October 3 agreement is linked to several steps that Pyongyang, Tokyo and Washington must first take. Forging an understanding between Tokyo and Pyongyang regarding the abduction issue clearly will be the most difficult step to accomplish. If the issue is not resolved, the United States will not drop North Korea from the terrorism list, and ultimately Pyongyang could refuse to allow disablement of its nuclear facilities and not issue an inventory of its nuclear programs pending its removal from the terrorism list.

The Seoul-Pyongyang Statement

This much more detailed statement sets forth a series of projects both Koreas aspire to accomplish in the near future as they continue to pursue national reconciliation. The projects accent “economic cooperation” that will increasingly link their two economies.

North Korea clearly will initially appear to be the primary beneficiary in economic terms. But South Korea will eventually gain considerably as well. Without pursuing reconciliation with Pyongyang, Seoul's future economic prosperity would remain at risk. Similarly, foreign investors would be reluctant to invest in South Korea's economy so long as the threat of war looms over the Korean Peninsula.

The "Declaration for the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity," as the statement is formally called, links the two Korea's future prosperity. It outlines a long term process that will re-vitalize North Korea's economy while fostering an atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula conducive to the continuation of South Korea's economic expansion.

The most immediate and potentially formidable impediment to the program's future success is the forthcoming presidential election in South Korea. The October 4 joint statement, and much of the prior progress toward reconciliation, has been possible because President Roh and his successor President Kim Dae-jung have not linked economic cooperation to North Korea agreeing to concessions on specific political issues use as resolution of the nuclear issue, etc. Were Roh's successor to do so, reconciliation's future progress could be jeopardized. South Koreans today generally support the priority assigned to pursuing reconciliation and are generally comfortable with its economic cost to South Korea. But South Korea's conservative politicians believe their government should demand concrete political and security concessions from Pyongyang in exchange for the South's continuing economic assistance. The outcome of South Korea's presidential election in December will have a significant impact on the future of the two Korea's reconciliation.

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