

# 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. Taken from discussions during the conference, their argument could be paraphrased thus:

- “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.”

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:

- “America is a democratic country. The US government cannot change the mindset of American people and politicians. North Korea should win American hearts and minds, and change them by demonstrating good behavior. The DPRK has no constituents or supporters in the US.”

- “Look at your track record. You pledged to denuclearize, as indicated in the September 19 Joint Statement, but you violated agreements by undertaking two underground nuclear tests and test-launching long-range ballistic missiles. How can we trust you?”

- “A peace treaty and diplomatic normalization both require ratification by US Congress. But no

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member of Congress would support ratification under current conditions. North Korea should show good behavior in order to win support in US Congress. In addition to the Beijing agreement on a moratorium and inspections, the DPRK should take additional measures. These include returning to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as concrete and visible steps toward denuclearization.”

- “Ideas such as an alliance with the US and provision by the US of nuclear umbrella are far-fetched. Unless the DPRK becomes a normal state, such arrangements are totally inconceivable.”

On the sidelines of this starkly bilateral dialogue, inter-Korean relations remained stuck in neutral. Seoul sent its nuclear envoy at the last moment, with the hopes of direct contact with his North Korean counterpart, but inter-Korean bilateral talks never materialized, although there were open exchanges of views during the conference between the two envoys. North Korean delegates were cold and firm toward South Korean delegates, avoiding any formal contacts. North Koreans argued that improvement in North Korea-US relations should come first, and that ties with South Korea and Japan will subsequently improve.

The North Korean delegation also refused to engage with South Koreans in any meaningful way unless Seoul re-establishes inter-Korean exchanges and co-operation, lifts the “Cheonan” measures of May 24th, 2010, and implements the joint declarations from the two inter-Korean summits of 2000 and 2007. The North Koreans criticized the Blue House for playing a double game — calling for a dialogue with Pyongyang while heightening military tensions with military exercises.

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