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## The Obama Administration and North Korea in 2009 Part 3: The Lessons of the First Year

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*With Joe Biden headed to the White House, North Korea watchers are speculating how the incoming administration will deal with this long-standing foreign policy irritant. One place to look for cues is to review the spate of Obama-era memoirs to outline his administration's first year with North Korea. In [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), I detailed the early Clinton gambit on denuclearization, its swift rejection by the North Koreans in their satellite launch of April and the nuclear test in May, and the passage of UNSC Resolution 1874. In this post, I consider the*

In the wake of the satellite launch, second nuclear test, and passage of UNSC 1874, North Korea escalated its rhetoric. The Foreign Ministry announced that the country would weaponize all newly-extracted plutonium, commence a uranium enrichment program, and provide a “decisive military response” to any “blockade” against the country. According to one of statement from the period, it had “become an absolutely impossible option for the DPRK to even think about giving up its nuclear weapons.”

For its part, the Obama administration was clearly in no mood to offer inducements for the purpose of getting North Korea back to the talks. In a widely-cited comment at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Singapore in May, Secretary Gates said the U.S. was “tired of buying the same horse twice” and expressed opposition to “the notion that we buy our way back to the status quo ante...” The administration also argued (and rightly from a legal point of view) that it was in any case not in a position to relax multilateral sanctions; any such change would be contingent on North Korea taking the actions called for under UN Security Council resolutions—including UNSC 1874—that were multilateral in nature.

The question nonetheless remained of what *prospective* benefits the United States and the other five parties might offer. While on a trip to China in October, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell hinted that “if North Korea is to take major steps to dismantle its nuclear capabilities that there must be a corresponding set of initiatives on the part of not only the United States but South Korea, China, and Japan.” Given the difficulties of implementing all components of the agenda outlined in the September 2005 statement of principles at one time, it seemed inevitable that any talks would have to focus on the phasing of inducements and reciprocal actions.

As I have shown in an [earlier post with Liuya Zhang](#), North Korean counterproposals cast doubt on Pyongyang’s seriousness. The subsequent diplomatic to-and-fro centered on the format under which negotiations would take place, but the proposals and counterproposals only served to disguise much more fundamental disagreements about the agenda. The United States repeatedly stated its willingness to engage with North Korea, including bilaterally, as long as those talks were held “within the framework” of the Six Party Talks. Not only did the Six Party Talks provide a multilateral venue for coordinating with Japan, South Korea, China and Russia; holding negotiations under the aegis of the Six Party Talks also assured that diplomacy would focus on denuclearization. The United

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The United States repeated its opposition to “talks for talks’ sake,” and sought to reconfirm Pyongyang’s commitment to agreements made in prior rounds of the talks. These included most notably in the September 2005 statement of principles and the implementation accords of February and October 2007.

Over the course of late 2009, a new North Korean strategy emerged that was deeply at odds not only with U.S. and South Korean views, but with the view of the other five parties as well. North Korea appeared to support a return to multilateral talks through initial bilateral talks with the U.S., and promised the high-level access that would permit indirect contact to the leadership; this constraint had plagued the late 2008 negotiations.

However, multilateral talks among the armistice parties and bilateral talks with the U.S. were now advanced as a precondition for even resuming—let alone completing—the agenda spelled out through the Six Party Talks process. Moreover, the objectives of the talks would not be limited to a bargain over North Korean denuclearization, but the “denuclearization of the entire peninsula.” Given that the U.S. had withdrawn all tactical nuclear weapons from the peninsula under the George H.W. Bush administration and South Korea had no nuclear weapons program, this formulation implied a reconsideration of the extended deterrent and even U.S. possession of nuclear weapons.

Despite these apparent problems, Bosworth was given latitude to try to bridge differences. He outlined the state of play in the second half of 2009 in a lecture he gave at Stanford in 2014:

*“After several rounds of consultations with officials of the countries participating in the Six-Party Talks and contacts with the North Koreans themselves, I went to Pyongyang in December 2009. We had what we thought were fairly constructive talks, and I came back to Washington hopeful that that we could start a new process of engagement and reinvigorate the Six-Party process. We began to take steps to invite Kim Kye Gwan to New York for a round of talks as a stepping-stone to reconvening the Six-Party Talks.”*

China also sought to bridge the divide through intense diplomatic activity in February and

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March 2010. However, these efforts were preceded by an even more crucial high-level visit that brought a rich array of positive incentives to bear. The visit effectively ratified Beijing's "deep engagement" approach to North Korea, promising the prospect of trade and investment. We have no smoking gun to prove that these efforts at "deep engagement" on the part of China had the direct effect of undermining the prospects for talks by weakening the sanctions effort. But whatever the intent of the Chinese initiatives, they clearly did not have the effect of restarting the talks. A procedural proposal by China would have granted North Korea another round of bilateral meetings with the United States, but was to be followed by a preparatory six party meeting in anticipation of a full resumption of the Six Party Talks. Accepting the Chinese proposal, the U.S. saw the steps as linked, with the bilateral meetings tied to a commitment to resume the talks. Despite early Chinese optimism about the proposal, North Korea remained silent on it.

Before Kim Gye Kwan could come to New York to explore the diplomatic options, the *Cheonan* incident occurred, turning policy in both the U.S. and South Korea in a harder direction. As Clinton and Gates both detail in their memoirs, at this juncture there was little the U.S. could do except side with its South Korean ally and strengthen the deterrent. Gates details a meeting with Lee Myung Bak in Singapore. According to Gates, "Lee was adamant that there could be no return to the Six Party Talks on the North's nuclear program until they admit their wrongdoing and renounce it. I concurred. Resumption of the Six Party Talks would be seen as a reward—the sequence must be consequences then talks." A little over a year into Obama's first turn, the U.S. and North Korea had cycled through crises and ended up in a cul-de-sac largely of North Korea's making.

What lessons can be drawn from Obama's trying first year with North Korea?

Biden—like Obama—will have other pressing domestic and foreign priorities. But when North Korea feels it is ignored, it tends to escalate.

Depending on the provocation, the United States has the power to convene a multilateral response. But more sanctions are unlikely to get North Korea back to the table and particularly if China resumes its role of lender of last resort and facilitator of wholesale sanctions evasion.

Tightening sanctions requires either cooperation from China, or as we would see later, an aggressive use of secondary sanctions against Chinese firms in order to get Beijing's attention.

A proposal in line with Clinton's initial gambit—which appeared to call for large-scale  
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North Korean action at the outset—will not only fail, but likely generate North Korean escalation and a hostile response from Beijing and Moscow. The proposals favored by both Bosworth and Biegun for the resumption of an incremental process are the only likely way forward.

But in the end, much depends on how North Korea comes out of the Party Congress and whether it was willing to engage. Preoccupied with the succession in 2009, and perhaps feeling vulnerable, it sought to show strength with the satellite launch and second nuclear test. If it goes this route again, Biden will face the same political constraints on reaching out to North Korea that Obama did.

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## Return to the Peninsula