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The North Korean Nuclear Moratorium: More of the Same?

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Synopsis

North Korea's pledge of a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests raises the prospect of resumption of the Six-Party Talks. But questions remain whether Pyongyang will fulfil its part of the bargain.

Commentary

THE ANNOUNCEMENT on 29 February 2012 that North Korea has pledged to suspend all nuclear tests, uranium enrichment and long-range missile tests has raised prospects of a new phase of diplomatic engagement with the United States. Under the agreement reached between North Korean and American diplomats in Beijing last month, Pyongyang will allow verification and monitoring of its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon by international inspectors - the first time since 2009. It is also the first moratorium to include a halt to missile testing.

The US, in return, has agreed to distribute 240,000 metric tonnes of food aid to North Korea over one year. Washington has called the pledge by Pyongyang a modest first step towards complete and verifiable denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. While this raises the prospect of a resumption of the Six-Party Talks for broader negotiations on nuclear disarmament, the State Department sounded a note of caution that persistence and patience were needed to ensure further headway.

Hot-and-cold nuclear diplomatic history

A closer look at this turn of events against North Korea's nuclear and foreign policy history may explain this modest expectation. For years, Pyongyang has engaged in what has been termed 'a cycle of provocation, then accommodation' with the US, South Korea and Japan. Arguably, this approach has helped North Korea's bargaining position, to meet its security, economic and diplomatic objectives during negotiations. This recent agreement does not deviate from that well-trodden path.

The provocation-accommodation pattern can be observed in the events of the past five years. In 2007 Pyongyang agreed to disable all nuclear facilities in exchange for economic, energy and humanitarian assistance from other Six-Party Talks participating states. The following year saw North Korea face its worst food crisis in a decade; the US responded by sending 500,000 tonnes of emergency food aid.

However, North Korea turned around from this accommodating stance in September 2008 by ignition-testing a long-range missile, reversing its decision to deactivate its Yongbyon facilities, and barring International Atomic

and Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors from nuclear sites. April 2009 saw North Korea continue down this provocative road by launching a Taepodong-2 rocket into space, evoking unanimous condemnation from the United Nations Security Council. North Korea responded to this by expelling all nuclear inspectors from the country and boycotting the Six-Party Talks.

In May 2009, North Korea conducted its second round of nuclear and long-range missile tests since October 2006. This was followed by the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan, a South Korean submarine, in March 2010 and the unveiling of North Korea's advanced uranium enrichment capability to a delegation of US scientists several months later. Tensions on the Korean peninsula were further raised by the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010.

A reasonably quiet period in 2011 followed and a return to accommodation was observed through a series of exploratory talks between US and North Korean negotiators, aimed at ultimately resuming the Six-Party Talks. However, this ground to a halt after the death of Kim Jong-Il and the succession to leadership of his son, Kim Jong-Un.

Six-Party Talks forum for bilateral deals?

North Korea's surprise announcement of the moratorium therefore invites the question of motive. Many doubt that North Korea will ever give up its nuclear programme, particularly with the demise of Kim Jong-Il. North Korea has vowed to maintain his policies, linking the nuclear programme to his legacy. In addition, this year marks the centennial of the Founding and Eternal President, Kim Il-Sung, and the government may use the US food aid to garner popular support.

As for the expected resumption of the Six-Party Talks, besides conceptualising policy, the real value of the talks is in providing a neutral forum for bilateral negotiations, specifically between North Korea and the US. It is noted that even this moratorium was born out of bilateral US-North Korea meetings.

However, others argue that the moratorium heralds an era of gradual change, drawing upon two major inferences. Firstly, after the death of Kim Jong-Il, the North Korean government's decision-making mechanisms remain fully operational under Kim Jong-Un. Secondly, North Korea's opting for a dialogue-based diplomacy rather than being confrontational is a significant step towards a Korean peninsula peace process and increased engagement with the US, South Korea and Japan. Furthermore, the moratorium indirectly helps further the global nuclear non-proliferation agenda; North Korea's assent is a welcome contrast to Iran's denial of access for IAEA to its Parchin nuclear facility.

Future Prospects

Although the moratorium contributes to the management of a potentially destabilising regional dynamic, further progress hinges upon whether North Korea will fulfil its part of the bargain. A discrepancy between the American and North Korean statements remains unresolved: the North Korean statement explicitly says that IAEA inspectors would be allowed only into its uranium enrichment programmes. But US officials have no doubt that North Korea had agreed to allow inspectors to confirm the freezing of both its uranium and plutonium-producing reactors. Further, there have been no commitments to restarting the Six-Party Talks. The US, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea have yet to unveil what they could offer North Korea in return for its complete denuclearisation.

On the domestic front, the North Korean Workers' Party will hold a party conference in mid-April which will afford Kim Jong-Un the opportunity to inherit the top party posts held by his father. At present, Kim Jong-Un is supreme commander of the Korean People's Army but has yet to assume other major positions including general secretary of the Workers' Party and chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission. It remains to be seen whether this official power transition will also mark shifts in North Korea's foreign and/or nuclear policies.

What is certain is that North Korea's complex nuclear and foreign policy history behoves only cautious optimism at best. The pivotal question is to what extent this history is indicative, though not necessarily predictive, of events to come.

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