

**Leif-Eric Easley, "The Tragedy of Building Trust with North Korea: Efforts to engage Pyongyang often cause divisions among its neighbors," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), July 19, 2007, page 11; printed in Japan as "Six-party Progress needs Five-party Trust," *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, July 27, 2007, page 21; updated version appeared in *OMNI*, July 29, 2007, page 1 and *Taipei Times*, August 31, 2007, page 8.**

The latest round of Six-party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program concluded with a press statement praising "productive bilateral consultations" to "enhance mutual trust." International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors this month confirmed the shutdown of North Korea's nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, and heavy fuel oil and humanitarian aid are shipping from South Korea to the North.

But the recent round of talks did not set a timetable for North Korea's denuclearization. Instead, the parties restated their agreement with previous agreements and promised more meetings: working groups in August, Six-party Talks in September and a minister-level meeting thereafter.

The road ahead is marked by big promises – denuclearization, economic aid, a peace treaty and diplomatic normalization – that will be difficult to achieve. It is thus essential to recall three key lessons from the world's recent dealings with Pyongyang.

First, stay engaged, to minimize North Korea's provocations and instability. Second, remain firm, as Pyongyang looks to exploit differences and weaknesses among concerned countries and tends to push the envelope when not deterred by consequences. Third, and perhaps most important for South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States: the five parties should not sacrifice trust among them for short-term gains with North Korea.

For the Six-party Talks to succeed, Pyongyang must be convinced that ending its nuclear programs and opening up to the international economy are strategic decisions in its own interest, not ploys to attack or cause its collapse. The Sept. 19, 2005 joint statement recognized the need to build this trust, calling for disarmament actions matched in stages with economic and diplomatic rewards.

The tragedy is that progress with Pyongyang has often exacerbated divisions among its neighbors – divisions that North Korea then uses to its advantage. In key cases, positive steps with the North proved short-lived, while the engagement initiatives in question damaged trust among the five parties.

In 1994, the United States bilaterally negotiated the Geneva Framework Agreement with North Korea. Left outside the negotiating room, Seoul decided it could not count on

Washington to represent South Korean interests and resolved to deal directly with Pyongyang whenever possible. Although the Framework Agreement successfully quelled a nuclear crisis, South Korea and Japan ended up largely financing a deal that was doomed to unravel between Pyongyang and Washington.

In 2002, Japan got ahead of the pack on engaging North Korea. Then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi arranged a trip to Pyongyang to attempt a breakthrough in normalizing Japan-North Korea relations. Washington had reservations about the trip, as did Seoul. Ultimately, Japan's efforts backfired over the controversy of Japanese citizens North Korea abducted decades ago, and relations deteriorated further as the current nuclear standoff unfolded in 2003.

In the years since, South Korea has led efforts to build trust with North Korea, pursuing ministerial meetings, joint economic projects and cultural exchanges. While these efforts have yet to soften North Korea's policies, U.S.-South Korea and South Korea-Japan relations were strained by what Washington and Tokyo saw as Seoul's unconditional engagement of a nuclear and missile proliferator.

Earlier this year, the United States employed behind the scenes diplomacy to reach the Feb. 13 agreement and resolve the Banco Delta Asia financial dispute with North Korea. But as Washington's flexibility came soon after North Korea's internationally rebuked missile launches and nuclear test, Tokyo worried the United States might abandon Japanese interests on the abduction issue or even quietly accept North Korea as a de facto nuclear power.

Tokyo has abstained from contributing to the present aid package linked with North Korean steps toward disarmament. However, it is yet unclear whether the Six-party Talks will follow the old pattern of failed attempts to build trust with Pyongyang.

If the United States, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia have learned from experience, the five will not sacrifice trust among them for short-term advances with North Korea.

The United States should not pursue military-to-military talks with North Korea outside the six-party framework because such talks would make South Korea, Japan and China anxious about being excluded from negotiations over a peace regime.

China should not look to patch up its relations with North Korea by giving aid and assurances to offset the hard-line stance it took after Pyongyang's October 2006 nuclear test. Doing so would damage Beijing's credibility for facilitating the Six-party Talks.

Japan should not press the abduction issue at the expense of progress on denuclearization. Certainly, Pyongyang must account for missing Japanese citizens in order to gain the benefits of normalized relations with Tokyo. But five-party trust will be damaged if

Japanese politicians are perceived to be using the abduction issue for domestic political purposes.

Finally, South Korea should not rush into a North-South summit, especially if such a meeting has more to do with South Korea's December presidential election than it does with improving security on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea is skilled at evoking a sense of crisis, using wedge tactics and playing to the domestic politics of other countries to command a higher price for its cooperation. Historically, efforts to build trust with North Korea spearheaded by one country tend to backfire. Gains with North Korea often prove transitory, while damage to trust among the five parties detracts from necessary policy coordination. Once the concerned countries fully appreciate this, diplomatic progress with North Korea need no longer come at the expense of trust among the five parties.

Prioritizing five-party trust will not only allow the Six-party Talks to more effectively address the North Korean nuclear issue, it will also build confidence for security cooperation among the five parties. The result could be a significant bonus: a stabilizing regional security mechanism developed along the bumpy road of North Korean denuclearization.

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