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AN UNWELCOME DÉJÀ VU: A NEW US-NORTH KOREA MISSILE DEAL

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When I look at North Korea's foreign policy toward the United States, I often get caught up in a feeling of déjà vu. This is not without cause. In contrast to the US, whose North Korean policy shifts in accordance to a change of government or of personnel with the same government, North Korea has had almost the same people in charge of its American policy since the first nuclear crisis some ten years ago. Throughout the period, the country has aimed at securing deterrence against the US by developing nuclear weapons and missiles and seeking from the US compensation for halting the development at crucial junctures.

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After the launch some ten years ago of *Taepodong-I*, which North Korea claimed to be a satellite launch, North Korea agreed to a moratorium on testing ballistic missiles while talks with the United States were underway in Berlin in September 1999. On behalf of the US, Secretary of Defense William Perry presented a comprehensive framework for negotiation in the so-called “Perry report,” which covered not only nuclear but also missile issues. The US-North Korea relationship took a step forward before President Bill Clinton’s planned visit to Pyongyang via the issuance of a joint communiqué in October 2000. Japan was then highly frustrated by this diplomatic development. It came at a time when South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung and North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-Il were also meeting in a historic North-South summit, and Japan’s relationship with North Korea was being overshadowed by the South-North Korean and US-North Korea relationships. Japan was alarmed by a possible visit by Clinton to Pyongyang because North Korea could take an uncompromising attitude toward Japan on the back of improved relations with the South and the US. Many in Japan’s diplomatic circles must have been relieved when Clinton gave up the idea of visiting Pyongyang.

It is obvious that, with the recent missile launch, North Korea is seeking a deal similar to the Berlin agreement it reached with the US ten years ago while showing off its missile capability. The Obama administration is not opposed to negotiating with North Korea. In fact, Stephen Bosworth, who delivered a personal letter from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Pyongyang in March, was named US special representative for North Korea afterward. This meant that President Obama moved up his special envoy diplomacy and kicked it off in North Korea.


However, the Obama administration finds itself under different conditions than those in the final days of the Clinton administration. First of all, there is the multilateral framework of the Six-Party Talks. As for Japan-North Korea relations, there is the Pyongyang Declaration adopted during the visit to Pyongyang by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2002. Improving bilateral relations in accordance with the declaration is mentioned in the joint statement of the Six-Party Talks and the agreement on the initial actions to implement the

statement. Furthermore, in South Korea, the administration of President Lee Myung-bak, who is actively seeking improved relations with the US and Japan and taking a pragmatic attitude toward North Korea, is into its second year. The euphoria created by the North-South summit between South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-Il in October 2007 has already faded. President Lee understands that cooperation among Japan, the US and South Korea is the foundation for dealing with North Korea while acknowledging the efficacy of the Six-Party Talks. It is largely due to the existence of the Six-Party Talks framework that, unlike the final days of the Clinton administration, Japan is not so frustrated diplomatically by the fact that the Obama administration has been seeking negotiations with Pyongyang since around the time of the recent North Korean missile launch.

North Korea had warned before the missile launch that, if the UN Security Council were to take up the problem, all the processes for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula would be reset to zero and North Korea would take “necessary strong measures.” Actually, North Korea expressed its intention to no longer participate in the Six-Party Talks and suspended disabling its nuclear facilities when the UN Security Council released its president’s statement on the missile launch. If the “necessary strong measures” include a nuclear test, the situation allows for no delay. The remaining parties of the Six-Party Talks have no intention of giving up on the framework, but the problem is that the agreement for the Six-Party Talks has no direct provision dealing with the missile problem. In this regard, US Secretary of State Clinton has rightly expressed the need to address all the issues, including the missile problem, within the framework of the Six-Party Talks.

It is certainly more difficult to take up the missile problem than the nuclear issue in a multilateral setting. To begin with, the missile problem has at least four dimensions: launch, export, development, and deployment. In light of the experience ten years ago, setting a moratorium on missile launches would be a starter, but the US, Japan and South Korea have different interests in dealing with the other dimensions. Japan is already exposed to the direct threat of North Korea’s *Nodong* ballistic missiles, but the US would be more concerned

with the further development of *Taepodong* and extension of its range as well as with the export of missile technology. For South Korea, which has been faced with the threat of the North's conventional military capability, ballistic missiles are not perceived as a direct threat. Rather, the country is concerned about North Korea developing a new US policy by using its nuclear development as leverage and losing interest in pursuing dialogue with the South. In this regard, the Six-Party Talks could become a framework to coordinate the interests of the three countries concerning the missile threats posed by North Korea, if it could place the missile problem on the agenda despite the difficulty of dealing with the problem in the Six-Party Talks.

Japan is not against the US negotiating with North Korea on missiles. The US, however, must make efforts to resume the Six-Party Talks through negotiations and bring the results of the negotiations to the Six-Party Talks. If realized, this would create a great diplomatic opportunity for Japan. When he visited Pyongyang in 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi agreed with Kim Jong-Il to start security talks, but this has not been realized yet. Given that the threat of missiles was one of the reasons that Koizumi called on the North Korean leader to engage in a security dialogue, setting up such a dialogue would lead Japan closer to a framework for a comprehensive solution of the "abduction, nuclear weapon and missile issues" that Japan is seeking from North Korea. In other words, Japan will experience an unwelcome *déjà vu* from the last days of the Clinton administration if Washington proceeds in negotiating with Pyongyang at the expense of the Six-Party Talks. 

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