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AMERICA, DON'T COUNT ON OUR FOLLOWERSHIP

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With the work to denuclearize North Korea seemingly getting off the ground at last, the United States is walking a tightrope in its attempt to accelerate the Six Party Talks process. Washington's recent negotiation tactics have increasingly tilted toward appeasement, now to the extent that it is about to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism despite the unresolved issue of the abduction of Japanese and other countries' nationals. Such a move, if made without close consultation with Japan, will considerably offend the Japanese public, encroaching upon their support for Japan's alliance with the United States. This in turn will inescapably

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debilitate the strong bilateral alliance that is essential for a hedging strategy of engagement and balancing vis-à-vis a rising China with a possible consequence of destabilizing the peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region.

Denuclearizing North Korea requires not only the temporary disablement of the three nuclear facilities at Yongbyon but also the complete and correct declaration of other nuclear facilities and programs, particularly Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) programs, followed by the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of all these elements. According to the mainstream Japanese perspective, both the nuclear and abduction issues are firmly embedded in the tyrannical nature of Pyongyang's dictatorship, that is, the regime is struggling to survive the international isolation caused by its grave human rights violations on the strength of nuclear weapons. It may be possible to separate the two issues in analysis, but not in any meaningful manner as a policy matter. Given the established record of Pyongyang's cheating and betrayal, complete denuclearization cannot be expected to be realized in the near future, a goal that can only be approached in a prolonged process.


The Six Party Talks are no longer an institutional mechanism to terminate the Cold War structure that persists on the Korean Peninsula. It has now metamorphosed into a *détente* approach predicated on continuous confrontation and coexistence with Pyongyang's die-hard dictatorship. The aim of this approach is to defuse politico-military tensions created by Pyongyang's confidence in the efficacy of the threat and use of nuclear weapons. Yet any transformation of the tensions is expected to occur only in the form of a series of concessions made by North Korea in response to large-scale international economic assistance given to it. Such economic assistance would be provided synchronous with the creation of a post-Korean War peace regime and the eventual formation of a regional multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia. This means the resolution of the North Korean nuclear and abduction issues will have to wait until Korean unification takes place.

Japan is practically the only country capable of providing such a massive amount of aid. However, Pyongyang's impending nuclear threats and indisputable offenses against sovereignty in the form of repeated abductions of Japanese nationals have convinced the Japanese government not to provide aid until Pyongyang has achieved complete denuclearization, scrapped its ballistic missiles, and settled the abduction issue. Since this government policy is rooted in a solid national consensus, Tokyo has little room for making compromises, at least in principle.

Furthermore, the Japanese public is now fully aware that Washington has ceased to speak of complete denuclearization (CVID), the HEU programs and, most crucially, the dozen or more rudimentary nuclear warheads that North Korea is believed to possess. It will not take long before the Japanese public realizes that Washington is extending a *de facto*, if not *de jure*, recognition of Pyongyang's nuclear power status.

Consequently, Washington's *détente* approach will sooner or later cause a backlash in Japanese public opinion, which will force the Japanese government to rethink its strategic calculations and alliance policy. Now that the opposition Democratic Party of Japan has seized control of the upper house of the Diet, Washington can no longer take Japan's followership in diplomacy for granted. Tokyo has become increasingly less pliable to US security interests, as demonstrated by the recent failure to renew the legislative measure authorizing Japan's participation in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom - Maritime Interdiction Operation.

Should Tokyo perceive that Washington is moving toward normalization with a nuclear North Korea, Tokyo would see itself being forced to coexist with a rogue state. This might lead to a worst case scenario where Japan, surrounded by a nuclear unified Korea, China and Russia, concludes that it can no longer trust and rely on the US nuclear umbrella and turns onto the path of going nuclear. In December 2006, Tokyo leaked some findings of an internal study: it would require only several years to develop effective nuclear weapon systems.

In order to avoid such a disaster, Washington should refrain from isolating Tokyo in the Six Party Talks process by lifting the pressure on Tokyo to provide aid, including heavy oil, to Pyongyang unless there is significant progress in the abduction issue. Rather, what Washington could do at most is to nudge Tokyo to cover a fair share of the costs necessary to denuclearize Pyongyang. In the long run, it would be wise for Washington to give a high priority to the abduction issue, for this would encourage Tokyo to provide economic assistance indispensable to carrying forward the long transformation process of the Korean Peninsula. Last but not least, in the case of the process being further prolonged, Washington should take measures to divert Tokyo's existentialistic imperative to go nuclear by offering minimal but effective deterrence vis-à-vis Pyongyang that would placate the fears of the Japanese public: several hundred Tomahawk cruise missiles without nuclear warheads, for instance. Otherwise, Japan would become a wild card. 

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