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USAPC: Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on October 14 that he's rarely seen better coordination between the United States and China on North Korea policy. Yet, the package of economic assistance offered by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il during meetings on October 4-6 would appear to undermine U.S.-led efforts to pressure North Korea via financial and other sanctions.

Some observers also proposed that China's initiative violated U.N. Resolution 1874. How was Wen's diplomacy consistent with the efforts of the five parties¹ to realize the denuclearization of North Korea?

Cha: I recently returned from Beijing. The Chinese assured me and others that the aid package delivered by Premier Wen, which the media valued at about \$20 million, did not violate U.N. Resolution 1874.

So how does the Wen visit affect the overall diplomatic picture? As we speak, it appears that [Li Gun], North Korea's deputy negotiator for the Six-Party Talks, will be coming to New York in late October for unofficial Track-Two discussions under the auspices of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy. I am sure the United States will send someone to participate in the Track-Two process in an effort to persuade the North Koreans to return to the Six-Party Talks.²

So in many ways, what we have witnessed in mid- to late-October is a replay of April 2005. At that time, which was the beginning of the second term of the Bush administration, Pyongyang had indicated it would not return to the Six-Party Talks owing to some statements made by Secretary of State Rice. But they then used the Track-Two process in New York to get things started again.

It looks like we are headed in this direction again. So in that sense, the Wen visit appears to have had a positive impact in that we now see all parties angling to return to some sort of discussions. The Chinese likely would say that Wen's visit helped to move the momentum in this direction. Whether it is good or bad to re-start the Six-Party process is a completely different question, however.

¹ China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States are participants in multilateral negotiations aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear program, also known as the Six-Party Talks.

² On October 24, the U.S. State Department confirmed that Amb. Sung Kim, U.S. Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks, indeed, met Amb. Li Gun in New York "to convey [the U.S.] position on denuclearization." The two also were expected to speak informally on October 26-27 on the sidelines of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Dialogue, another Track-Two dialogue initiative sponsored by the University of California San Diego in La Jolla, California.

USAPC: Kim apparently indicated to Wen that North Korea was prepared to engage bilaterally with the United States, and if Washington ended its “hostile policy,” Pyongyang would reengage in the Six-Party process. But North Korea’s definition of “hostile policy,” which includes the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Northeast Asia – would appear to make this condition a non-starter. This is confusing.

Cha: Yes, it really does not make a whole lot of sense. North Korea’s statements about the need for the United States to end its “hostile policy” and provide security assurances are crutches that the North Koreans try to use to shift the blame for lack of progress in the Six-Party process to the United States and away from them.

In fact, since the administration of President George H. W. Bush, the United States has provided some form of security assurance to North Korea. In a recently published article in *Washington Quarterly*, I researched and listed every security assurance that the United States has provided North Korea. This list ended up being 15 pages long.

These are not assurances which state that the United States would support the Kim regime. Rather, these statements simply assure North Korea that the United States does not have a hostile policy toward it and is not seeking to attack it.

If fear of a U.S. attack presumably is one of the main reasons why Pyongyang is pursuing a nuclear weapons program, Washington is on record for the past 16 years stating that we have no intention of attacking North Korea with conventional or nuclear weapons. If North Korea were to attack first, of course, we would respond. But Washington has clearly stated that we have no intention of preemptively attacking the North.

So, again, North Korea’s statements about Washington’s “hostile policy” are meant to shift the diplomatic ball into the U.S. court so we become the party that begs North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks. The fact of the matter is that the sanctions set forth by the U.N. Security Council following Pyongyang’s nuclear test on May 25 have been very tough and have taken a bite out of North Korea. And that is the reason the North Koreans want to return to the Six-Party Talks.

A lot of diplomatic theater frequently takes place. But often there are very simple answers that explain North Korean behavior. First, North Korea pursues nuclear weapons development because it desires to be a nuclear weapons state. And second, the reason why Pyongyang wants to return to the Six-Party Talks now -- after pushing off the Obama administration from the very beginning of its term -- is because the sanctions that were implemented following its nuclear test are starting to hurt.

USAPC: Some analysts have argued that economic sanctions in and of themselves will not change North Korea’s behavior. They say we need a more sophisticated approach that combines carrots, such as U.S. diplomatic recognition, with measurable commitments from North Korea to reduce and eliminate its nuclear weapons program. What is your view?

Cha: The sanctions serve two purposes. First, they punish North Korea for its behavior, and second, they counter North Korea’s proliferation efforts. I would agree with the view that sanctions alone will never make North Korea denuclearize. What is needed to end North Korea’s program is either some sort of negotiations or regime change. No one has the stomach for regime change, so that leaves negotiations. So, in that sense, analysts who criticize the sanctions on

grounds that they will not compel North Korea to end its nuclear program are correct because the sanctions serve these other purposes.

There needs to be some sort of negotiations to get at the denuclearization aspect, and that requires some incentives. Many people do not like to talk about incentives when it comes to North Korea. But going back to the Clinton and Bush administrations, a similar bargain has been presented to North Korea.

This bargain has been -- give up your nuclear weapons and you potentially will get a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War, normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, energy assistance, economic assistance, and a place at the table as a normal member of the international community. This essentially is the bargain that has been offered to Pyongyang in different forms from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration to the Obama administration.

USAPC: Given the possibility that U.S.-North Korea talks do not lead to the resumption of the Six Party process, do you think U.S.-led financial sanctions, the PSI [Proliferation Security Initiative], and other punitive measures can effectively limit North Korea's ability to proliferate? Is that the best we can hope for in the near- to mid-term, that is, a type of containment strategy?

Cha: If the current diplomatic negotiations fail, or even if they succeed for that matter, counter-proliferation sanctions will continue to be part of the new picture. North Korea is much further along in their nuclear capabilities than it was 10 years ago. And the proliferation threat is real. We saw evidence of that in North Korea's sales to Syria. There are potentially other countries that would buy missiles or nuclear technology from Pyongyang.

So regardless of whether the negotiations go well or badly, I think it is important to continue the counter-proliferation sanctions. And this is the first counter-proliferation regime created for North Korea that was backed by the United Nations.

No standing administration official will say, however, that these sanctions amount to a containment strategy. Even I, as a private citizen, would hesitate to call counter-proliferation sanctions a *de facto* containment strategy. This is because when you use the word "contain," you basically are accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

But there is no denying that the sanctions are about containing the proliferation threat. The negotiations, which are a crucial complement, are about denuclearization and managing a problem so it does not spin out of control and create a larger crisis in the region.

USAPC: Although Kim appeared alert and healthy in the photos with Wen, nevertheless there are reports of a leadership transition in the works. Do you think this opens or closes a window of opportunity to affect North Korea's nuclear policy? Should we press now or wait until a new leader assumes the helm?

Cha: As former Secretary of Defense William Perry once said, "You have to deal with North Korea as it is, not as you wish it to be." I think that is right from the perspective of negotiators. You cannot wait for some "unknown;" you have to negotiate with whom and what you have.

Kim Jong-Il certainly looks better these days than he did earlier this year during the People's Assembly. He looked well in his meetings with President Clinton on August 4, when

the former president went to North Korea to secure the release of the two imprisoned American journalists. And Kim looked well in his meetings Premier Wen.

But at the same time, it is pretty clear that he has suffered a stroke, which means the future may be very uncertain. He could be around for another decade – or he could be dead tomorrow. There is a great deal of variability in the time horizon, and there is nothing one can do to control that. The only thing one can do is press forward with the negotiations.

If the sanctions are about counter-proliferation, they will continue as long as there are nuclear weapons in North Korea. But, as we discussed earlier, the sanctions alone will not get you denuclearization or enable you to get a handle on the North's nuclear program, in terms of gaining access for international inspectors, sealing the buildings, and freezing production again. You must negotiate to realize those objectives. Negotiators from the United States, Japan, China, the ROK [Republic of Korea], and Russia must remain focused on that. They cannot wait or hope for some future leadership transition.

USAPC: How influential will the North Korean military be in the leadership succession process? Do you think Kim's provocative behavior is aimed at securing the military's support for his chosen successor?

Cha: The role of the North Korean military is important. But I do not think it is as significant a political actor as some analysts make it out to be. When Kim Jong-Il became the new leader of North Korea following the death of his father, Kim Il-Sung, he did not have the revolutionary credentials of his father. He therefore sought to build what is referred to as the "military first" policy, which brought the military under his wing so he could rule with more authority and have the military as his instrument of control.

In that sense, the military became more significant. But their significance is largely a function of their behavior as a professional military. That is to say, they are very important and forceful in the North Korean system as long as they are being ordered to do something by a political actor.

I do not think the military on its own is a political actor. This is largely because anyone who has any sort of political ambition within the North Korean military system is purged. In the past, there were reports of some huge purges of ambitious, up-and-coming generals who were seeking to cultivate some sort of movement outside of the basic chain of command.

In a transition from Kim Jong-Il to a future leader, particularly if it is one of his sons, the military will play an important role. But it will be important in the sense that the military will serve whatever political actor is in control.

This is a slightly different view than the one held by many observers who anticipate four main actors in a post-Kim Jong-Il era: the Kim family; the Korean Worker's Party; the military; and domestic security forces. I would say three of those will be actors, but the military likely will become an instrument of one of them.

USAPC: What is your view of the North Korean military's actual capabilities? How serious a threat do they pose to the ROK?

Cha: Traditionally, the North Korean military has been a conventional, forward-deployed force. It is much larger in numbers than ROK forces and U.S. forces based in the

South, but much lesser in terms of capabilities and training. Nonetheless, the North Korean military still can pose a very formidable invasion force.

This is one area in which the U.S.-ROK alliance really has succeeded in terms of deterrence. Fifty years of deterrence has held on the Korean peninsula, and the threat of a North Korean conventional attack is not very high. There is always the danger of missile coercion or nuclear coercion, but the conventional threat pretty much as been deterred.

This is not to say that the North does not pose a security threat. The threat that North Korea poses to the United States, quite frankly, is not that Pyongyang will put a nuclear weapon on a missile and fire it at Hawaii. The real threat that the North poses to U.S. core security interests is the danger of proliferation, whether it be proliferation of scientists, fissile material, weapons design, and so forth. These are the things that are the most directly threatening to the United States.

We know how to deter North Korea from invading the South and we know how to punish Pyongyang with U.N. sanctions when it conducts missile tests and nuclear tests. But we still are not very good at deterring North Korea from proliferation or from testing missiles. So this remains a problem and has to be one of the priorities for the Obama administration.

USAPC: With respect to possible future missile tests by North Korea, do you think we run the risk of a horrific accident, such as launch that goes off-course and hits Japan? How would we respond to that scenario and, more important, how do we avoid it?

Cha: As recently as October 12, North Korea tested six short-range missiles. I was in China at the time and asked Chinese officials how they viewed the missile launches coming on the heels of Premier Wen's trip to North Korea, which included a huge basket of goodies. At this stage, the Chinese media has been conditioned to dismiss North Korean missile tests as nothing more than "North Korea's attempt to get attention and lure the United States into negotiations."

The fact of the matter is that these missile tests are very dangerous, especially the ballistic missile tests, because they usually fly over Japan. If one of these missiles failed in the ascent and landed on Japan instead of in the Pacific Ocean or in the Sea of Japan, that would be a major incident. The Japanese likely would invoke the U.S.-Japan security alliance, which would oblige Washington to come to its defense.

If you deal with national security, you cannot take these tests lightly. In the past, North Korea has conducted tests that have failed. We just have been lucky that the missiles landed in the water.

As I said earlier, finding a way to deter Pyongyang from conducting these tests is important. One of the things that the United States used to have with North Korea was a moratorium on missile tests. Pyongyang walked away from that agreement.

I imagine one of the near-term objectives of the Obama administration is to try and reinstate the missile-testing moratorium. That certainly would benefit the United States in terms of delaying North Korea's efforts to develop ballistic missiles. A moratorium on testing also should ease Japanese concerns about potentially being under threat from those tests.

USAPC: How does the apparent thaw in North-South relations – i.e., Pyongyang’s apology for the flood-related deaths³, the temporary family reunion program in late September, and resumption of inter-Korea border traffic – fit into North Korea’s game plan to maintain its nuclear weapons capability? Is this an example of divide-and-conquer tactics?

Cha: Again, the main driving factors behind North Korea’s “charm offensive” toward the South are the U.N. sanctions. They are hurting the North. Pyongyang is afraid that there will be more sanctions, so North Korean leaders are seeking to reduce that likelihood through this “charm offensive” with the ROK.

The fact that Pyongyang apologized for the flood victims is a good thing. But I do not think the South Korean government is going into this with wide-eyed optimism. On September 23, South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak unveiled his idea of a “grand bargain” at the U.N. General Assembly. This is not the so-called “sunshine policy” of President Lee’s predecessor. Rather, this appears to be a policy that is very principled and very clear about how far Seoul will go to engage Pyongyang.

Essentially, the ROK will not enter into major inter-Korean projects that cost hundreds of millions of dollars without real progress on denuclearization. There is a clear condition for the big-ticket projects.

With respect to intermediate projects, such as Kaesong [Industrial Park] and the Kumgangsan [Tourist Region], Seoul appears willing to re-start and continue them -- provided that North Korea does not shoot South Korean tourists again.⁴ In addition, the ROK wants to see more institutionalization of family reunions and the return of South Korean prisoners-of-war who have been held in the North for 50 years.

So there is a very clear *quid pro quo* for progress on Kaesong and Kumgangsan. The only thing that is unconditional, which I believe the Lee administration is about ready to implement, is the provision of humanitarian assistance to children in the form of non-rice food and medicines. That sounds to me like a very principled policy. It is pretty clear that is the direction that the Lee administration wants to go, which makes coordination with the United States relatively easy.

One of the big problems experienced by previous U.S. administrations was that the sunshine policy did not impose any real upper limits on cooperation. It was unconditional reciprocity. There were not specific actions North Korea had to take that were linked to the inter-Korean engagement process.

President Lee is a businessman. He is not going to put taxpayers’ money into inter-Korean engagement unless he gets something out of it from the North. And I think that is a position with which the United States is very comfortable.

USAPC: The United States and China have very different goals in their policies toward North Korea. Washington wants denuclearization, but Beijing is primarily

³ Six South Koreans were killed in early September when North Korea released water from a dam on the Imjin River without notice. The resulting flash flood swept away six people, including a child, who were camping on the river bank. The Imjin is a major waterway that flows across the border between North Korean and South Korea.

⁴ In July 2008, Park Wang-Ja, a 53-year-old South Korean tourist, was shot twice and killed when she allegedly entered a military area. Immediately after the shooting the South Korean government suspended tours to the resort. Shortly thereafter, Pyongyang announced that they would expel “unnecessary” South Korean workers from Kumgangsan.

concerned about regime stability. How can we keep these differences from impeding real progress in the Six-Party process?

Cha: This poses a real challenge to arriving at a solution in the Six-Party Talks. China's core interest is its future growth and development. It wants nothing to impede that. That goal applied to the Korean Peninsula means no crisis and no instability. Basically, this means management rather than resolution of the North Korean problem.

As you noted, the core interest of the United States is denuclearization. The challenge for the United States is to get the Chinese to understand that as long as there are nuclear weapons in North Korea, the situation will never be stable. The status quo itself is inherently destabilizing or on a downward slope to becoming more and more unstable.

I think the Chinese understand that argument, particularly when the North behaves badly. But Beijing would much rather push the difficult decisions as far into the future as they can while they ensure stability that does not impede their growth path. So it's a constant challenge in the Six-Party Talks to get the Chinese to be more than simply hosts and to push productively toward a resolution that would be in both of our interests.