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Seoul Nuclear Summit: Back to the Drawing Board

By Benjamin Ho

Synopsis

Global concerns over North Korea's and Iran's nuclear ambitions saw little open debate at the recently-concluded Seoul Nuclear Security Summit. Participating states would have to go back to the drawing board soon, especially with North Korea's proposed satellite launch a matter of weeks away.

Commentary

AFTER MUCH political posturing and relentless rhetoric in the lead-up to the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit, the two-day conference – attended by some 58 countries and international organisations – ended with a joint communiqué that reaffirmed the need to ensure “a safer world for all”. Not surprisingly, critics have pointed out that such a communiqué – long on commitments but short on specifics – amounted to little substantial progress. The announcement by the United States on 29 March 2012 to suspend food aid to North Korea is nothing new; in short, we are back to the drawing board.

To be fair, this nuclear stalemate is not unexpected; indeed, only the most optimistic – or naive – would have expected anything of meaningful consequence. Short of North Korea making an about-face, the status quo was always likely to persist as the key players continue to disagree on their fundamental positions.

United States

Notwithstanding his strongly-worded statements against nuclear terrorism, President Barack Obama's visit to Seoul can be best described as a symbolic one. Indeed, the US President's visit broke little new ground – as far as real policy debate was concerned. His trip to the demilitarised zone – listed as the most dangerous place in the world – provided plenty of photo opportunities and sound bites but otherwise little in terms of moving the nuclear issue forward. The much anticipated bilateral discussions with China's President Hu Jintao also failed to move Beijing's hand, at least in public.

While both countries agreed to “coordinate their responses” in the event of a Pyongyang rocket launch, there was little elaboration about how this coordination could be achieved. Ironically, the biggest impact Obama made was almost entirely unrelated to the nuclear agenda, but regarding America's missile defence system vis-à-vis Russia. The infamous private conversation with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev picked up by microphones has now become an issue of domestic contention. Whether it was a calculated risk or a Freudian slip, one thing is for sure: US interests have not been helped by the latest gaffe.

China

Likewise, Beijing's presence at the summit was also largely symbolic and revealed little about the Chinese leadership's intentions. The official Xinhua news agency quoted Hu as saying that China "does not hope to see a reversal of the hard-won momentum of relaxation of tensions on the Korean peninsula". Once again, this is restating the obvious: no country wants any conflict to take place on the Korean peninsula.

Unlike Washington however, Beijing seems to be in no rush to alter the status quo – especially in a year of political transition in China and in the face of increasing domestic challenges. Moving forward, what Beijing chooses – or chooses not – to do in its relationship with Pyongyang would assume increased significance, particularly if it perceives that the cost of aiding its nuclear neighbour outweighs the benefits of doing so.

South Korea

The organising of the summit probably counts as one of South Korea's key achievements this year. Despite security concerns over Pyongyang's sabre-rattling, the event passed without any incident. Yet, this is only a start insofar as Seoul's interests are concerned. More pressing concerns remain, chief of which is the possible outbreak of war in the Korean peninsula, particularly if Pyongyang chooses to go all out in securing its interests. To what extent Seoul would retaliate if it comes under attack will be of crucial importance.

The fact that the South has historically eschewed a nuclear option in guarding against the North in favour of a US-extended deterrence umbrella suggests that its choices will be closely aligned with those favoured by Washington. Nevertheless, as the Cheonan sinking demonstrated, public outrage against the North may sway the South to make its own choices independently from Washington's preferences especially if Pyongyang's decide to act on its threats.

Japan

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's no-show at the summit's opening dinner and his subsequent muted presence among the world leaders suggest that Japan's current preoccupation may have less to do with North Korea and more on domestic politics – a consumption tax hike which Prime Minister Noda has said he is staking his political career on. As the Japan Times commented, even the Prime Minister's bilateral meetings with top world leaders were "impromptu chats that lasted for a few minutes"

Furthermore, public sentiment for the use of nuclear energy in Japan is at an all-time low given the unpleasant memories of Fukushima. The Japanese Defence Ministry has made mention of its readiness to deploy ground-based Patriot interceptors to shoot down the missile or its fragments should they fall into Japanese territory. This, however, remains to be seen, particularly if Pyongyang's missile test runs smoothly.

Indeed Pyongyang's launch of its Taepo-Dong-II ballistic missile in 2009 saw the missile travelling unimpeded, first over the Sea of Japan, then Japan itself – before its remaining stages and payload fell into the Pacific Ocean, 600 kilometres off Japan's eastern coast. Would Tokyo run the risk of allowing this to happen again – and emboldening Pyongyang to utilise its territory for future missile tests?

With the eyes of the world trained on Asia, the upcoming weeks will witness more intense political lobbying and behind the scenes manoeuvring from these key players. Up till now, Pyongyang's leadership has not budged, nor has it indicated any signs of acquiescing to global demands.

Notwithstanding its songun (military-first) politics and juche (policy of self-reliance) ideology, Kim Jong-un has maintained a shroud of steely silence, electing to adopt the cold methodical approaches that has served Pyongyang's interests for almost half a century. This is bad news for the world as time is running out.

Benjamin Ho Tze Ern is an Associate Research Fellow with the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.