THE MAUREEN AND MIKE MANSFIELD FOUNDATION

Testimony of

L. Gordon Flake

Executive Director
The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation

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"Breaking the Cycle of North Korean Provocations"

Beyond the Bilateral: Understanding the Challenge of North Korea in a Regional Context

One of the particular challenges in dealing with an opaque regime like North Korea is the difficulty in assessing the intentions or motivations behind particular policies or positions taken by the North Korean government. Absent reliable information on North Korea's internal decision-making process, a common conceit in the United States is to assume that North Korean actions and statements are somehow "all about us," motivated by and targeted to an audience in the United States. Given the asymmetry of U.S. power globally, such assumptions are not limited to U.S. dealings with North Korea. Yet in the absence of alternative explanations from Pyongyang, this narrative often holds sway as analysts, journalists and government officials alike attempt to interpret the most recent North Korean provocation or charm offensive.

The problem with this approach is that the conclusion drawn inevitably seems to be the same no matter what the North Korea action, and again it is all about us. Thus, North Korea's long range missile tests and nuclear tests are purported to be attempts to force the U.S. into direct bilateral talks. Pyongyang's August 2009 decision to divest itself of two imprisoned U.S. journalists for the price of having former President Clinton pick them up is likewise seen as a sign of outreach to the United States, as was the decision to turn over the unfortunate Ajalon Gomes to former President Carter in August of 2010.

More recently, in early November 2010 when North Korea showed separate delegations from the United States evidence of construction on a new light water nuclear reactor and a surprisingly sophisticated uranium enrichment facility, calls for the United States to resume negotiations with North Korea were both immediate and predictable.
Even after North Korea shelled the South Korean coastal island of Yeonpyeong on November 23, 2010, in a drastic and highly provocative escalation of the long-standing inter-Korean tensions in the West Sea, some Americans persisted in interpreting this action in context of U.S.-North Korean relations. For example, former president Jimmy Carter authored a *New York Times* op-ed entitled "North Korea Wants to Make a Deal"[1] following his August visit to Pyongyang. He again urged the U.S. to listen to "North Korea's Consistent Message to the U.S."[2] in a *Washington Post* op-ed that described the North's unprecedented provocation as "designed to remind the world that they deserve respect in negotiations" and repeated North Korea's insistence on "direct talks with the United States."

Of course, there are alternate if equally improvable interpretations of North Korean intentions or the motivations behind North Korean actions and statements. Given the fact that North Korea has now repeatedly declared itself a nuclear power and declared its intent to develop nuclear deterrence as well as nuclear energy, its decision to test nuclear weapons and to construct both a light water nuclear reactor facility and a uranium enrichment facility might more logically be understood in the context of North Korea's

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/16/opinion/16carter.html
[2] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/23/AR2010112305808.html

stated intentions and goals. The notion that "all politics is local" is not only applicable to democracies. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has made ample use of its nuclear tests and status in its internal propaganda and there is increasing evidence to suggest that with the continued decline of its conventional military capacity, chronic food shortages, and a moribund economy, the legitimacy of the Kim regime is increasingly tied to its nuclear status. This should weigh heavily on the decades-old debate as to whether the North Korean nuclear program is primarily -- or at this point even possibly -- a bargaining chip.

In addition to such domestic factors, North Korean actions are also far better understood in the context of the DPRK's more immediate relationships with its primary patron China and its chief rival, the Republic of Korea (ROK.) Given the priority that China has placed upon the moribund Six-Party Talks, it would be foolish not to interpret North Korea's reluctant references to the possibility of returning to such talks squarely in the context of Chinese demands. Likewise, given the relatively dramatic shift in South Korea's policy toward its Northern neighbor after a decade of "sunshine" (during which the government in ROK was a major source of food, fertilizer, and capital for the DPRK), many of Pyongyang's actions and statements are better explained by such immediate concerns than by any aspirations it might have vis-à-vis the United States. Accordingly, this testimony focuses primarily upon the regional context of recent North Korean actions and upon the importance of a regional approach to responding to developments in North Korea, regardless of their nature or direction. While Japan and Russia have and continue to play important roles related to North Korea and the Six-Party Talks, this testimony focuses primarily on changes in South Korea and in China that are most directly related to the current cycle of North Korean provocations.

Peninsular Primacy: The Inter-Korean Dynamic

The country with the most interest -- and the most to lose -- in increased tensions with North Korea is undeniably its neighbor to the south, the Republic of Korea. Changing political dynamics in South Korea are also one of the most important factors in understanding the changed inter-Korean political relationship. After the better part of four decades of inter-Korean relations defined primarily by ongoing hostility and deterrence, South Korea's policy towards the North shifted dramatically after the costs of German unification became readily apparent. Beginning with the inauguration of the Kim Dae Jung administration in 1998, South Korea began to pursue a policy of "peaceful coexistence" with North Korea. This was followed by a policy of proactive engagement which was primarily manifest by the rather one-sided provisions of South Korean investment, fertilizer, and humanitarian aid to North Korea. This approach was initially intended to affect change in North Korea in the manner of Aesop's famed fable of "The North Wind and the Sun." However, over the next decade the primary objective of ROK policy toward North Korea, particularly during the Roh Mu Hyun administration, apparently shifted to one of ensuring stability in North Korea --at least in the short run.

While the South Korean presidential election of 2007 was primarily a mandate on the management style and failings of the Roh administration, it was also somewhat of a

referendum on President Roh's policy towards North Korea. Still, President Lee Myung Bak entered office espousing a long-term vision for inter-Korean relations that included significant South Korean investment in North Korea and a stated goal of dramatically increasing North Korean per capita GNP. This approach, however, was premised on changes on North Korean behavior, particularly on progress toward denuclearizing North Korea, an issue that had gained renewed salience following North Korea's October 9, 2006 test of a nuclear device. In practice, President Lee's policy was a sharp departure from that of his predecessors. The president and his advisors more openly raised issues such as North Korean human rights, participated in international efforts to curb North Korea's illicit activities, and changed they manner in which they handled development and humanitarian aid -- all changes that were very unwelcome in Pyongyang.

In another respect, President Lee's approach to North Korea was at least in part a reflection of changing South Korean attitudes toward Pyongyang. Not only was there a growing sense that South Korea's decade of largess was unappreciated and unreciprocated, but during the first years of the Lee Administration, a series of North Korean actions further influenced underlying South Korean public opinion and as a result Seoul's policy toward the North. On July 11, 2008, North Korean soldiers shot a South Korean tourist in the back at the Diamond Mountain resort. North Korea's subsequent refusal to engage in a joint investigation of the incident led to a shuttering of the Hyundai-Asan operated tourist zone. The fact that this event took place in the context of a North Korean long-range missile test and nuclear test on April 5 and May 25, 2009, respectively, further hardened South Korean public opinion. Despite these and subsequent events, South Korea has yet to pull its support from the Kaesong Industrial Complex, however the detention of a South Korean employee for 137 days during the summer of 2009 further colored South Korean views of that project and the prospects for engagement with North Korea. Tensions again rose in the West Sea with a naval altercation[3] South Korea calls the "Battle of Daecheong" on November 10, 2009. This resulted in severe damage of a North Korean patrol boat and North Korean threats of retaliation, which may have found their realization in the sinking of the South Korean corvette the *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010.

While the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the tragic loss of forty-six South Korean sailors shocked the South Korean public, initial uncertainty about the cause of the tragedy, the lengthy investigation, the fact that the incident took place out of sight and at night, and the fact that the initial findings of the investigation were announced shortly before South Korean local elections all served to make this particular incident politically divisive within South Korea. That was not the case with the November 23, 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. The North Korean artillery barrage took place in broad daylight, and if a picture is worth a thousand words, live video must certainly be worth many times more. Real time images of columns of smoke streaming skyward from the island as

[3] After nearly 50 years of relative quiet on the West Sea, in mid-1999 North Korea began a concerted effort to challenge the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which it has never officially recognized, but which has served as a de facto maritime border since the signing of the armistice. Of the many subsequent naval clashes along the NLL, it is worth noting that both the first and second "Battle Yeonpyeong"(June 15, 1999 and June 29, 2002) occurred despite the ROK's then-engagement policy toward the North.

panicked refugees fled the scene served to affect the most fundamental shift in South Korean public opinion toward North Korea in over a decade. Suddenly President Lee Myung Bok who in some circles was still considered to be a hardliner was accused of failing to protect the nation and threatened with impeachment by some members of his party. President Lee, whose apparent first instinct and first statements focused on avoiding an escalation of the crisis, was gradually pushed by public outrage to revise the rules of engagement and to state clearly that any future such incidents would be met with a considerable show of force.

In this political context tensions on the Korea peninsula rose dramatically in December 2010 with South Korea's decision to proceed with further live fire exercises in the area surrounding Yeonpyeong Island in the face of North Korean threats to retaliate. While these exercises as well as joint U.S. and South Korean naval exercises went forth without immediate North Korean retaliation, it is useful to remember that North Korea's retaliation does not always take place at a time and place of the allies' choosing and tensions on the peninsula remain high. If the sinking of the *Cheonan* was indeed the promised North Korean response to the Battle of Daecheong five months earlier, U.S. and South Korean defense planners would be wise to watch for a similarly out of the blue, seemingly unprovoked response to Seoul's decision to continue its live fire exercises in the face of North Korean threats.

Perhaps encouraged by Chinese pressure in advance of President Hu Jin Tao's January visit to Washington, Pyongyang began this year with calls for "unconditional" talks with South Korea. On the surface, this would seem to be a welcome development, particularly following the tensions surrounding the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island last November. However, even if one is inclined to take such diplomatic overtures from North Korea at face value, this offer is anything but "unconditional." To begin with, an unspoken condition of such talks was that South Korea ignore what were by almost any measure two recent acts of war by North Korea. Absent any reference to its actions, the North Korean offer of talks seems less like a sincere offer for negotiations and more like an attempt to cause political divisions in South Korea by casting itself as the willing party and the Lee Myung Bak administration as the obstacle to diplomacy.

The content of the talks proposed by North Korea provides further indication of its intentions. In the initial North Korean offer, there was scant mention of security issues, military-to-military dialogue, or North Korea's nuclear program. Instead, Pyongyang proposed to talk about economic cooperation with a transparent objective of seeking to renew the flow of South Korea aid and the cash that accompanied past cooperation. What North Korea has to gain from such talks is obvious, the benefit for South Korea is less clear. Even during the decade of engagement and summitry under two successive progressive governments in South Korea, Pyongyang steadfastly resisted recognizing South Korea as a legitimate partner for a meaningful dialogue on security issues on the peninsula including the armistice, a potential peace agreement, or North Korea's nuclear program.

In this context, North Korea's mid-January 2011 proposal for high-level military-to-military talks with the South was certainly a positive development. Given the events of the preceding months, South Korea responded cautiously and proposed preparatory talks in early February that broke off amidst mutual recriminations. Of note, the question of North Korea's nuclear program was not on the agenda, and South Korea's attempts to ensure that the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island incidents were on the agenda for the senior level meeting appears to have been the primary area of dispute and the cause for breakdown of the talks. Despite the apparent stalemate, South Korean officials have repeatedly stated that an apology for the incidents is not a precondition nor is it formally linked to the resumption of Six-Party Talks. While President Lee himself has repeatedly and recently emphasized his desire for talks with the North and resumption of the Six-Party Talks, in the short-term progress on that front appears unlikely.

South Korea's changing approach to North Korea has also had a direct impact on U.S.-South Korean relations and upon the United States' ability to coordinate its own policies towards North Korea. For example, much of the political difficulties experienced between Washington and Seoul during the tenure of President Roh Moo Hyun can be attributed to what were then rapidly diverging threat perceptions regarding North Korea. Over the past three years, due in part to the laundry list of provocations noted above, there has been a dramatic re-convergence in U.S. and ROK perceptions of North Korea. This alone, however, cannot explain the dramatic improvement in US-ROK relations. The improvement began with the election of President Lee during the last year of the Bush administration and accelerated dramatically given the high priority the incoming Obama administration placed upon prior consultation and coordination with its ally Seoul on all matters regarding North Korea. The June 19, 2009, Joint Vision Statement for the U.S.-ROK Alliance[4] is an historic document. This, along with the Korea U.S.-Free Trade Agreement, the ROK role in and hosting of the G-20, and its role in and hosting of the next Nuclear Security Summit, lends substance to the claim that U.S.-ROK relations are the best that they have ever been.

The result of this convergence has been a remarkably principled, consistent and well-coordinated policy between Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo in regards to North Korea. Historically both the U.S. and ROK approaches toward North Korea have vacillated, while North Korea has remained relatively consistent in its demands and intransigence. The inevitable failure of one approach has led successive democratic governments in both Seoul and Washington to try different approaches at different times over the past two decades. One need only contrast the vastly different approaches to North Korea during the first and second term of the Bush administration for evidence of this tendency.

Ironically, one of the most immediate causes of the most recent cycle of North Korean provocations may be the consistent and coordinated approach with which the Obama and the Lee administrations have responded to North Korea. President Obama has repeatedly framed the joint U.S.-ROK approach in the context of the need to "break the pattern" of responding to North Korean provocations with concessions and talks that do not make

[4] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/

progress on core issues at hand. In response, it is North Korea that has vacillated between threats, inducements, provocations, charm offensives, and outright attacks in their attempt to force or cajole the U.S. and South Korea to abandon their current approach. While this approach may portend further tensions in the months ahead, to abandon principles at this point would be to surrender to the cycle.

China: Partner or Patron

While somewhat simplistic, one way to understand Chinese priorities in North Korea is to focus upon the more negative scenarios that China clearly hopes to avoid on the peninsula. The are the three "no's" -- no nukes, no collapse, and no war. China has long sought to balance what have oftentimes been competing priorities in this regard. For the better part of the past eight years cooperation on addressing the challenges posed by North Korea and in particular the North Korean missile and nuclear programs has been a highlight of U.S.-China cooperation. A perfunctory review of official U.S. statements regarding China during the bulk of the Bush administration and the early months of the Obama administration will turn up a veritable mantra highlighting the importance of the U.S.-China relationship in working together on North Korea. Indeed, in the early months of the Obama administration, U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea reached its arguable peak as, despite their initial misgivings, China supported a strongly worded Presidential Statement at the UN Security Council in response to North Korea's testing of a long-range missile. Shortly thereafter, on June 12 2009, China signed on to the most meaningful sanctions resolutions on North Korea to date, UNSC1874.

While the exact cause of the shift is as of yet unknown, after initially cooperating with the United States and the international community in implementing these sanctions, beginning sometime around the early fall 2009 there appears to have been a marked shift in Chinese priorities and views on how best to address the North Korean problem. Not only did they scale back their cooperation on implementing the UN Security Council sanctions, but they also began to be overtly and actively supportive of the Kim Jong-Il regime. One possible explanation is that given the concern over North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il's health, the uncertainties surrounding the succession process in North Korea, and evidence of ongoing economic turmoil in North Korea, the Chinese leadership felt it necessary to place a higher priority on its objective of avoiding collapse in North Korea. Stepped-up Chinese support for North Korea continued over the fall, and even when faced with the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010, the Chinese leadership decided to double their bet on the Kim Jong-Il regime rather than altering course. Chinese President Hu Jun Tao met with Kim Jong-Il not just once but twice in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking and China repeatedly refused to hear evidence on or except conclusion that North Korea was responsible for this tragic event. As recently as October 2000 Chinese officials were almost smug in their assessment of the rectitude of their approach, noting with some satisfaction that since China had begun to seek an easing of pressure on North Korea and had become more overt in their backing for the Kim Jong-Il regime, North Korea had not tested another nuclear weapon, had not tested another long-range missile and had not disrupted the G-20 meetings with President Hu in Seoul.

This defense of the Chinese approach unraveled dramatically in November 2010 when in quick succession North Korea announced that it had begun construction of light water nuclear reactor and showed a visiting U.S. delegation what appeared to be a uranium enrichment facility replete with 2000 centrifuges in three different cascades and what appeared to be highly sophisticated modern control facilities. These were both developments that were clearly in violation not only of three different sets of standing UN Security Council sanctions resolutions, but more specifically in violation of the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-Party Talks. These disturbing revelations were then capped by the North Korean shelling of Yeongpyeong Island, an act that killed two South Korean marines and two South Korean civilians. While North Korea claimed that its artillery barrage was in response to a South Korean live fire exercise in the area earlier that morning, the shelling of the South Korean island marks the first time since the end of hostilities in the Korean War that artillery shells were fired and landed upon South Korean. Despite the dramatic and shocking nature of these activities, China once again prevaricated and called for calm on all sides.

It is notable that over the period of shifting Chinese priorities in regards to North Korea there has also been a shift in U.S. views of China's role, beginning with disappointment over Chinese implementation of UNSC sanctions resolutions that China has voted for. By the summer of 2010 these concerns were expressed as criticisms of China's willful ignorance of North Korean behavior. U.S. views shifted further still following the most recent revelations regarding North Korea's nuclear program and its November artillery barrage. China was openly accused of "enabling" North Korean bad behavior--the implication being that China's decision to shield North Korea from the consequences of its actions was at least in part responsible for the continuation of such provocations. Secretary of State Clinton perhaps said it best when, immediately prior to the Obama-Hu summit, she openly questioned whether China's failure to respond to the sinking of the South Korean corvette was not in some way responsible for the North Korean willingness to go forward with its artillery barrage: "We fear and have discussed this in depth with our Chinese friends, that failure to respond clearly to the sinking of a South Korean military vessel might embolden North Korea to continue on a dangerous course. The attack on Yeonpyeong Island that took the lives of civilians soon followed."[5] In short, after the better part of a decade of being viewed as part of the solution to North Korea there is a growing concern that absent a readjustment of its priorities, China is increasingly part of the problem.

In this context, there was particular importance placed upon the January summit meeting between President Obama and Chinese President Hu Jin Tao. While there were obviously many issues to be addressed in the summit meeting given the risk of conflict on the Korean peninsula and the proximity of recent attacks, it is safe to presume that North Korea was a high priority in discussions. While for his part President Hu could not muster a willingness to even mention North Korea by name -- preferring instead to refer obliquely to the "Korean peninsula issue" or the "Korean nuclear problem" -- there was some evidence of progress, at least in examining how the issue was framed.

[5] http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/americas/prepared-text-of-clintons-speech/article1870858/

While it may seem arcane, there is some cause for optimism to be found in the single paragraph of the joint statement issued by President.

> The United States and China agreed on the critical importance of maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula as underscored by the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005 and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. Both sides expressed concern over heightened tensions on the Peninsula triggered by recent developments. The two sides noted their continuing efforts to cooperate closely on matters concerning the Peninsula. The United States and China emphasized the importance of an improvement in North-South relations and agreed that sincere and constructive inter-Korean dialogue is an essential step. Agreeing on the crucial importance of denuclearization of the Peninsula in order to preserve peace and stability in Northeast Asia, the United States and China reiterated the need for concrete and effective steps to achieve the goal of denuclearization and for full implementation of the other commitments made in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks. In this context, the United States and China expressed concern regarding the DPRK's claimed uranium enrichment program. Both sides oppose all activities inconsistent with the 2005 Joint Statement and relevant international obligations and commitments. The two sides called for the necessary steps that would allow for early resumption of the Six-Party Talks process to address this and other relevant issues.[6]

In that short statement the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-Party Talks was mentioned three times. Such a reference to an obscure unimplemented agreement of talks that increasingly appeared defunct may seem a bit odd. However, one of the fundamental challenges of dealing with North Korea has been its frequent and continued assertion that it is a nuclear power and must be dealt with as such. When North Korea makes vague references to its support of denuclearization, its definition of denuclearization should be clarified and challenged. The apparent North Korean interpretation is that, as a nuclear power and an equal with the United States and the other nuclear powers in the world, it is willing to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, including the removal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the end of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and overall global disarmament of other nuclear powers' positions. This interpretation understandably is not acceptable to the United States, China, any other member of the Six-Party Talks, or ostensibly any other signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) (from which North Korea is the only country in history to withdraw). As such, a clear reference to the September 19, 2005, joint statement in which North Korea committed to "abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards"[7] helps set a clear definition of what the U.S. and China now jointly mean when we refer to "denuclearization" including the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Related to this

[6] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/19/us-china-joint-statement the and
[7] http://www.state.gov/p/eap/regional/c15455.htm

is the question of the parameter of the Six-Party Talks. With the September 19 joint statement the Six-Party Talks are now more than format, but also have function and content. Given that in the joint statement "the Six Parties unanimously reaffirmed that the goal of the Six-Party Talks is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner," by focusing upon this joint statement the U.S. and China once again jointly defined the parameters of -- and indirectly a core requirement for -- the resumption of the Six-party Talks. Also of note, the January 19, 2011, Obama-Hu joint statement also placed U.S. and Chinese "concern regarding the DPRK's claimed uranium enrichment program" clearly in the context of the September 19, 2005 joint statement.

Despite what appears to have been some progress during the January summit, there is at present some frustration at China's apparent refusal to allow the UN Security Council to take up the question of the North Korea uranium enrichment program. Given the clarity of this issue and its importance to the broader objective on denuclearization, China's current position is if anything difficult to understand and will be a key indicator of China's role going forward.

Few analysts realistically expect China to abandon its erstwhile North Korean ally or to be proactive in putting major pressure on Pyongyang. However, at a minimum it is reasonable to expect China to recalibrate its position to make sure that it recognizes that in the process of trying to avoid collapse in North Korea, its approach to North Korea is actually increasing the risk of conflict and the likelihood of the further advancement of North Korea's nuclear program. At this point the key contribution China could make toward helping break the cycle of North Korean provocations would be to simply stop shielding North Korea from the consequences of its actions. In no small part, the current cycle of North Korean provocations has been abetted by, if not encouraged by, apparently unconditional support from China.

Conclusion

The particular focus of this hearing is helpful in that it distinguishes between the much longer-term task of solving the myriad issues related to North Korea and its inherent insecurity and the more immediate task of breaking free of the current cycle of North Korean provocations. Any effort to seriously address the recent cycle of North Korean provocations must begin with an attempt to understand the root causes of North Korean actions.

Although these causes cannot be fully addressed in this testimony, there is disturbing evidence that suggests that much of the current crisis in North Korea is related to internal developments inside North Korea. Following Kim Jong-Il's apparent stroke in 2008, the process of succession planning in North Korea appears to have been rushed. Given the multitude of economic, societal and security challenges faced by the current regime in North Korea, the prospects for a smooth transition to a third generation of Kims appears daunting. As much as recent North Korean provocations are directly related to the succession and the internal situation within North Korea, they may simply be beyond our control. Just as recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated the limits of

American influence, even in countries where we have overriding national security interests, so too are there very real limitations on our ability to directly influence ongoing dynamics within Pyongyang.

However, given that the primary context -- and in some cases facilitation -- of many recent North Korean actions lies firmly in the countries bordering North Korea, understanding this dynamic and working together with American allies and other partners in the region offers the best hope of breaking the cycle of North Korean provocations.

On a regional level, there are two factors most directly related to North Korea's most recent cycle of provocation. First and foremost is the change in South Korean policy toward the North, which now deprives the North of key inputs to its economy and government upon which the DPRK had come to rely. Related to this factor is, of course, the remarkably well-coordinated approach between the United States, South Korea and Japan and the consistency with which this approach has been applied in response to North Korean actions. In some respects, the pendulum swing of North Korean provocations and diplomatic initiatives is an indication of the success of this approach. Perversely, however, if the U.S. and its allies are serious about "breaking the pattern" of North Korean negotiating behavior, there are inherent risks of escalation and miscalculation related to that approach.

The best way to mitigate such risks is to ensure as close as possible coordination with all other partners in the region. Here lies the second factor related to the current escalatory cycle -- China's increased support for Pyongyang despite North Korean actions. This is not to shift full responsibility to China or to imply that China has either the will or the capacity to somehow "solve" the North Korean problem. But in the current context there is ample evidence to suggest that China's efforts to avoid the downside risk of instability in North Korea are at least in part responsible for enabling recent North Korean provocations, thereby increasing the risk of conflict. China's disproportionate focus on internal stability in North Korea has made a challenge related to North Korea's nuclear program infinitely more complex.

China has already clearly demonstrated that, left to its own devices, it is prepared to tolerate, if not actively support, the North Korean regime despite the downside risks as long as it can avoid instability. This is a tendency within China that is likely stronger today after the dramatic events of the past month in the Middle East.

The question is thus how best might the United States and its allies influence Chinese decision-making. While there is no easy answer, the importance of a unified approach cannot be overstated. The U.S. and its allies must continue to as clearly as possible make the case to China that North Korea's actions are detrimental to the stability of the region and to China's own strategic national interests. As long as China is not willing to cooperate and continues to shield North Korea from the consequences of its actions, the U.S. and its allies should make clear that they must prepare to respond to likely future North Korean provocations outside of the context of coordination with China, a scenario which is in no one's interest.

While this conclusion may appear stark, it is also firmly grounded in the political realities of a crisis with North Korea that appears to offer fewer options with each passing day. For example, a fundamental precondition for resumption of the Six- Party Talks is a willingness on North Korea's part to abandon its assertion that it is a nuclear power. In their January 19 joint summit statement, President Obama and President Hu rightly defined that precondition as adherence to the September 19, 2005 joint statement of the Six-Party Talks. Put simply, if China continues to bolster the North Korean regime, there is little hope that North Korea will make the minimum necessary compromises for resumption of meaningful dialogue. At the same time, given the severity of the acts perpetrated against South Korea, the United States cannot help but be supportive of its allies, and the underlying fact remains that it is impossible to conceive of progress in the Six Party Talks framework or even in a bilateral U.S. - North Korea talks absent meaningful progress in North-South relations.

In this process it is always useful to step back and remember that the United States' fundamental strategic interests in Northeast Asia are the peace, prosperity and economic progress of the region as a whole. In some respects, North Korea is best understood as the hole in the Northeast Asian donut. Our first priority is rightly placed on strengthening our alliance relationships in the region. Based upon a foundation of strong relations with Japan and Korea, the United States has considerably more influence with China and Russia than it would have otherwise. Likewise, the United States and its allies have a shared interest in ensuring that no matter what happens in North Korea -- whether it collapses, instigates further conflict or, more hopefully, chooses a different path -- that North Korea does not become an issue of contestation or conflict in the region more broadly.