

The Future of South Korea in Nuclear Affairs

Seoyi Kim

Both Iran and the Republic of Korea, as signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), are claiming an innate right of retaining an indigenous nuclear program for the peaceful purposes of research, medical isotope production, electric power generation, and the like. The assertion takes its foothold on the article IV of the NPT guaranteeing the parties to the treaty an inalienable right to peaceful use of nuclear energy. Against their aspiration, however, the request is not likely to be welcomed because giving states parties a right to engage in sensitive nuclear fuel-cycle activities, including uranium enrichment and plutonium separation, can enable those countries to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, which is a breach of their obligations under the article II of the Treaty. This business about not allowing enrichment or reprocessing was added in the mid-70s after the NPT entered into force, and it has been an issue between rich countries and rising countries ever since. It has always aroused an inequality controversy.

Iran cites the right to peaceful uses, but it has been under punishing international sanctions since its unreported nuclear activity surfaced after the IAEA's June 2003 report. Furthermore, defying its obligations even after signing an additional protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement, Iran has been regarded as a faithless, irresponsible state to the treaty. It is not surprising, therefore, that other states think that Iran is disguising its weapons program as a civilian program. However, since Iran already has a robust nuclear enrichment program and has insisted on retaining some enrichment capacity, denying enrichment is also no longer a feasible, achievable diplomatic goal. Satisfying Iran's strategic "sweet spot," maintaining the potential for enrichment, while avoiding the regional and international costs of actual weaponization (the U.S. "red line") has been and will continue to be a challenge. The P5+1/Iran negotiations have to square this circle by reaching a Comprehensive Nuclear Agreement with Iran. Though each has motives to find a middle ground – Western countries want to constrain Iranian nuclear weapons program and Iran desires to end the country's isolation and crippling sanctions- the hope for doing this through the Comprehensive Nuclear Agreement may be dimming due to Iran's volatile domestic political situation (accepting limits on Iran's nuclear research and development could seriously weaken President Hassan Rouhani) and Western concerns about a "breakout capability." The recent decision to extend nuclear negotiations until June 30, 2015 proves the difficulty of bridging the gap between those two parties. The next six months will tell the tale.

Compared to Iran, the Republic of Korea has established itself as a clean player by abiding by the international rules faithfully. It ranks fifth in the world after U.S., France, Japan, and Russia for running a successful nuclear power plant system. South Korea is trying to revise its US "123 agreement" (the US-ROK agreement for civilian nuclear cooperation) in a way that allows South Korea to enrich uranium and reprocess used nuclear fuel autonomously. Between the right of enrichment and reprocessing, the ROK prioritizes the latter, assuring other countries that it will never manufacture nuclear weapons and will open its nuclear facilities to IAEA's inspection. Although there has been a limited agreement with the IAEA that the right of reprocessing would be given once the technique called pyroprocessing proves to be free from proliferation concern, it is hard to expect the U.S. to give its actual consent to an expansion of this program. ROK public voices demand sovereignty over its nuclear program, however, and will clearly intensify if Iran or Japan succeed in, or even they are acquiesced to, negotiating any additional rights related to their fuel-cycle activities.

Given the situation, we need to look at what Korea is currently doing to elicit regional cooperation on nuclear affairs and what seems to be a means to achieve maximum nuclear sovereignty and independence.

China, South Korea, and Japan are in close proximity. All (even Japan after Fukushima) are

increasing reliance on nuclear energy. One could expect that a Northeast Asian nuclear cooperation organization would already exist to facilitate this process, but that is far from the case. These states are reluctant to consider regional cooperation. A Top Regulators' Meeting (TRM) among Korea, China and Japan set up to address nuclear safety has been held annually since 2008, but the cooperation has been confined to no more than enhancing alert systems in the event of an emergency like a nuclear power plant accident. The Republic of Korea and Japan, at different points in the nuclear fuel cycle, pursue bilateral arrangements with the United States. China's inclination is to maintain independence in the nuclear area, and its political conflicts within the region impede cooperation. That is why "ASIATOM" proposed by many nuclear experts in 1990s (emulating "EURATOM") has never been adopted. There remains limited cooperation between China and Japan and the ROK and Japan, much less a broader arrangement.

Therefore, in my opinion, establishment of something like ASIATOM is now of vital importance. Activities under the organization such as a regional safeguard system, regional fuel cycle center, nuclear power safety, and an organization for cooperation on research could reduce the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation by enhancing nuclear transparency and encouraging the region's peaceful nuclear use. For its part, Korea could pave the way for its completion of the nuclear fuel cycle through this regional cooperative arrangement.

Achieving such a collaborative structure could go a long way in addressing the "Asian Paradox," relatively underdeveloped political and security cooperation compared to growing economic interdependence. Korean President Park has laid out such a plan with the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). Since the trust deficit in the region is the root cause of little cooperation, NAPCI seeks to build trust in Northeast Asia by starting to cooperate on non-traditional soft security issues. For example, the TRM plus was launched comprising of the existing TRM members of Korea, China and Japan, and new countries such as the US and Russia in order to revitalize and develop the existing TRM. The intention seems to be to re-start off with the smallest and most accessible thing of accomplishing cooperation on nuclear safety successfully which failed to be attained through the existing TRM. The 7th TRM and the 2nd TRM plus were held on September 2 and November 26, 2014, respectively, but the goal of ambitious multilateral nuclear cooperation arrangement remains a distant possibility. Failure to achieve this means that Korea will lose the most.

By Korea's continued reliance on bilateral solutions, it seems rather to build a wall in the region rather than take it down, thus hampering cooperation. Building ASIATOM maintaining the US-ROK-Japan trilateral alliance and taking on a strong multilateral approach Korea can solve its nuclear dilemma and achieve greater cooperation in Northeast Asia.