Time to Shift from Tension to Talks
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It is far more comforting to talk about talks than to discuss the dangers of war on the Korean Peninsula. Last year was full of tensions and confrontations between the North and South, which culminated in the sinking of the Cheonan ship allegedly by a North Korean torpedo, an exchange of artillery fire over Yeonpyeong Island, and an ensuing escalation of readiness for war.

The beginning of this year brings a new momentum for resuming talks with North Korea. Talks, if held, will be about avoiding provocations, about keeping the peace and stability, about improving inter-Korean relations, and ultimately about dismantling North Korea’s nuclear programs. However, we don’t even know whether the rare momentum would be captured for a breakthrough or it would be let wither away. The momentum did not come out of the blue.

Perhaps, the tipping point from tension to talks was reached when the North chose not to fire back, contrary to its dire warnings of a nuclear war, in response to the December 20 live fire drill by the South Korean forces. Yet, the South had continued its intense military exercises to assure strong retaliation against future provocations by the North, which had caused concerns in Beijing and Washington that the South might be foolhardy in military confrontation with the unpredictable North.

A crack in Seoul’s posture appeared when President Lee Myung-bak started making conflicting comments on North Korea for better or worse during the year-end reports from the ministries of unification and foreign affairs. By this point, Lee may have concluded that he had adequately addressed public calls for a stronger posture against North Korean provocation, but realizing that a resolute security alone would not be enough to resolve the North Korean issue.

Some of Lee’s statements deserve a scrutiny. “There should not always be military confrontation between the North and South. We should also work for the settlement of peace through inter-Korean dialogue.” (Dec. 29 to the unification minister) “We should not be discussing unification by absorption. The North Korean nuclear issue should be resolved through the Six-Party Talks during the year 2011, because North Korea aims
at becoming a ‘strong and prosperous nation’ in 2012... Judging from the Yeonpyeong incident, unification is a distant story.” (Dec. 29 to the foreign minister)

Even with a positive spin of these statements, the Lee government is still seen as shunning a genuine dialogue with the North Korean regime. President Lee’s ministers and advisors are determined to look forward to an eventual collapse of the Kim royal family and a “peaceful democratic unification,” for which Lee urges his people to work with the neighboring countries including China and Russia. The unification ministry even said it plans to work on the people in the North to precipitate the process of unification, meaning to turn them against the Kim Jong Il regime. Given the strict surveillance system of North Korean society, few believe this strategy will work.

George W. Bush had rhetorically tried to differentiate the North Korean people from their rulers, but that only produced an adverse impact on U.S. negotiations with the North Korean government.

In his New Year address on January 3, the president told the North that the path to dialogue and peace is “still open.” He urged the North to give up “nuclear weapons and military adventurism” and to “work toward peace and cooperation not just in rhetoric but also in action.” This mixed signal came two days after Pyongyang called for an end to confrontation and dialogue through a New Year’s joint editorial of three major North Korean newspapers.

On January 5, Pyongyang issued a more aggressive joint statement proposing to hold unconditional talks with Seoul in the name of the DPRK government, the Workers’ Party and other organizations. The North is calling for “an unconditional and early opening of talks between the authorities having real power and responsibilities.” The North Koreans “are ready to meet anyone anytime and anywhere.” According to the statement, they want to conduct “positive dialogue and negotiations with the political parties and organizations of South Korea including its authorities, be they authorities or civilians, ruling parties or opposition parties, progressives or conservatives.” However, the statement made no mention of the Cheonan or Yeonpyeong incidents.

What stands in the way to talks now is a question of how to define North Korea’s “sincerity.” All parties, with the exception of North Korea, seem to agree that any resumption of the Six-Party Talks must be preceded by an improved inter-Korean relationship. Seoul has held a position that there is no purpose for talks, unless the North Koreans are “genuinely sincere.” Other than that, there is no agreed set of preconditions for resuming talks with the North, although there has been a lot of talk about possible requirements, including stopping provocations, suspending all uranium