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The Secretary's Morning Intelligence Summary

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DPRK: Raising the Armistice Issue

For practical and symbolic reasons the North Koreans want the United States to focus on replacing the 1953 armistice agreement as a crucial step in transforming our relations. Pyongyang has proceeded carefully up to now but apparently believes that some movement is essential. The North is signaling that it may raise the issue more prominently at the next round of talks in Geneva.

In a foreign ministry spokesman's statement yesterday, the North reiterated its argument that a continuation of the armistice agreement is incompatible with the process of normalizing US-DPRK relations. At the same time, the statement laid the groundwork for the North to move toward an arrangement that includes both South Korea and the United States. By referring to the 1991 North-South nonaggression declaration, the statement implicitly acknowledged Pyongyang's previous commitment to ROK participation in replacing the armistice. But it also underlined the North's position that agreement to such participation should not be interpreted as assent to Seoul's argument that replacing the armistice is strictly an inter-Korean matter.

Seoul's sensitivities

This is the kind of issue on which the South Koreans are painfully skittish. It touches exposed nerves about their legitimacy and their independence from the United States. For tactical reasons Pyongyang is happy to play on South Korean sensitivities about the future of the armistice. But Pyongyang also seems to realize that cutting the South Koreans out of the process is unrealistic — especially if it is serious about improving relations with the United States.

Domestic angle

Beginning with its high-level talks with the United States in 1992, the North has indicated that when the remnants of the old era of hostility were erased, it would be freer to move ahead with policies suitable to the new situation. However tautological, the argument has resonance in Pyongyang.

Effectively, it means that change begets change: a tangible change in the external situation would give pragmatists in the leadership leverage to effect modifications in economic and foreign policy. In late June 1993 there was evidence the pragmatists did try, unsuccessfully, to use the US-DPRK joint statement as the symbol of just the sort of change they needed to press their case.

Cross purposes

Pyongyang faces a challenging task of trying to balance the desire to move ahead on replacing the armistice with keeping US-DPRK talks on track. The North's chief negotiator in Geneva, Kang Sok Ju, has been curiously tentative in raising the armistice question. He has mentioned it several times but never gave it central place in his presentation. This may be tactical, but there were signs earlier this year of differences in the leadership on how to fit the armistice question into the talks. Kang may not have been in favor of raising it too early, for fear it would overload the process.

Glacial change

The North's recent success in getting the Chinese to recall their representative to the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) is in line with efforts in the past few years aimed at slowly dismantling or paralyzing the armistice machinery. It does not appear Pyongyang wants to destabilize the situation, rather they want the United States to focus on the question.

In April, when they announced they were withdrawing their own representatives from the MAC,

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the North made it clear the armistice would remain in effect until it was replaced. That theme was sounded again in Pyongyang's treatment of the Chinese decision. DPRK media noted that PRC Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in his meeting with

the North Korean special envoy called for a new peace arrangement to be established "gradually."
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