



# Breaking News Brief

*Vol. 1, No. 4, October 8, 2009*

These occasional briefs are designed to provide a quick overview and analysis of important events as they happen. Written by USC KSI faculty and fellows, the briefs are distributed by e-mail and are available on the KSI website, <http://college.usc.edu/ksi>. All media are free to quote from this briefing, provided reference is made to the author and the USC Korean Studies Institute.

## **Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea**

David C. Kang, Director, USC Korean Studies Institute

*1. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang this week to celebrate the 60th anniversary of PRC-DPRK diplomatic relations North Korea, and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il made a pledge to return to multiparty talks Is this likely to happen?*

**David C. Kang:** Unfortunately, while the prospect for multilateral negotiations is a welcome development, it is also likely to be a long time before any serious negotiations begin. While even opening the nuclear negotiations would be a positive step, it also appears that there is very little potential for actual movement in the negotiations at this time. All summer long the North has been hinting that it might be willing to come back to the table precisely because it has proven to the world that it has a nuclear capability. Kim Jong-il's announcement contained many preconditions and left unanswered many questions, and it is quite likely that this latest statement is little more than an opening ploy in what will be a long and protracted set of "negotiations about negotiations."

*2. What does Wen's visit to North Korea tell us about PRC-DPRK relations?*

**Kang:** Most significantly, the visit and the effusive rhetoric from both leaders is ample evidence that China has no intention of abandoning North Korea, or putting sizable pressure on the North to modify its ways. China has long been the most reliable ally for Kim Jong-il and the North Korean state, and it is Chinese economic and political relations that serve as a lifeline to the regime in Pyongyang. Many observers over the past year have speculated that the Chinese were growing increasingly frustrated with Kim Jong-il and his aggressive actions, and speculated that the Chinese were likely to begin rethinking their support of Kim. Chinese scholars and policymakers have indeed voiced increasing unhappiness with Kim's policies.

However, Wen's visit revealed that it is probably premature to speculate that China is so upset with North Korea that it will reverse its policy toward North Korea. It is premature not because of any genuine affection between the two countries, but rather because of China's own national interest. China continues to see North Korean collapse and the possible disruption of its borders through refugee flows as a greater threat than North Korean militancy; and while China desires denuclearization in the region and that North Korea would follow the Chinese model of

economic reform, it is still pursuing those goals quietly and without exerting ample pressure on North Korea. Until Chinese priorities shift, it is unlikely to take any serious coercive measures toward North Korea. Indeed, the support that Wen brought with him was sizable: up to US\$200 million worth of economic assistance, support in the fields of education and technology, and most visibly, Chinese funds to build a new bridge over the Yalu River. At the same time, the Chinese have consistently urged North Korea to reform their economy along Chinese lines, but as the North Korean leadership has only chosen to experiment with economic reforms, and has not fully embraced a “Chinese-style” of political and economic rule.

### ***3. Were the sanctions imposed under UN resolution 1874 part of the reason Kim is willing to return to negotiations?***

**Kang:** Some observers have suggested that Kim’s willingness to talk now is a result of the pain of the economic sanctions imposed on North Korea by UN resolution 1874. Those UN sanctions came about in response to the North’s nuclear and missile tests earlier this year, and have targeted North Korean exports, proliferation of military technology, and luxury goods. Yet we should be cautious about concluding that sanctions have worked to bring North Korea back to the table. The North Korean leadership has endured far worse economic isolation from the world in the past, and the regime is clearly prepared to endure sanctions today. Furthermore, my own belief is that North Korea hopes to use the bilateral talks precisely to remove the sanctions. That is, North Korea has claimed that removal of the sanctions must precede any realistic discussion of denuclearization on the Korean peninsula, and Kim’s willingness to talk is most likely really a way of saying that “if sanctions are removed” the North is willing to talk. This also is exactly the opposite of what the U.S., South Korea, and Japan expect: their policy is that after North Korea denuclearizes, the sanctions will be removed. Thus, once again we are in a position with North Korea where both sides may agree on the ultimate goals, and both sides may even agree on the solution to those goals. But once again, the key question will be “who goes first?”

### ***4. What is the likelihood that the U.S. will negotiate bilaterally with North Korea? Will this leave South Korea on the outside once again?***

**Kang:** The key part of Kim Jong-il’s announcement was his explicit condition that bilateral talks with the U.S. must precede any multilateral negotiations. This is something the U.S. is highly unlikely to agree to do; in fact, the Obama administration has long claimed that bilateral negotiations will only occur in the context of multilateral negotiations, and that the U.S. will not abandon its own allies (South Korea and Japan). The explicit Obama administration policy towards North Korea is a preference for dialogue and negotiation; but the Obama administration just as explicitly has pledged to work closely with its allies, as well as to “break the cycle” of North Korea provocation and negotiation. The Obama administration has been consistent in its application of those principles, and it is unlikely to change them now.

*[David C. Kang](#) is Professor of International Relations and Business, and Director of the Korean Studies Institute, at the University of Southern California. He is author of China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia; and co-author of Nuclear North Korea.*