

## **US-North Korea Wrestling Match in Beijing**

**By  
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Round two of the Six Party Talks between China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States just ended in another tie. As most people expected, there was no dramatic diplomatic breakthrough. On the contrary, everything played out according to expectations, except for China's extension of the talks into a fourth day.

The hundreds of Japanese and Korean journalists who watched the encounter must have been hard pressed to satisfy their editors' desires for flashy headlines and dramatic reports. The United States press largely ignored the talks. CNN news occasionally devoted brief reports in the "crawl" line that flows across the bottom of the television screen. The Washington Post ran a single daily story on page 10 or 12. Even the New York Times gave the talks only an occasional glance.

But behind the headlines, some very significant progress is being made. Progress is better measured by goals, not expectations. The talks have several important goals: halt the escalation of tensions in Northeast Asia, use diplomacy to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons and prevent a second Korea War. Relative to these goals, the talks have made very significant progress in two of three areas.

Now, compared to one year ago, the situation in Northeast Asia is much less tense. Last February Washington and Pyongyang both seemed determined to escalate the tensions. Pyongyang was talking about building a "nuclear deterrence" and Washington was refusing to engage in any negotiations.

One year later, the escalation of tensions has stopped. Instead, North Korea in recent weeks has repeatedly offered to "freeze" its nuclear weapons program. According to press reports this past week Pyongyang has even agreed to allow International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring at North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear research Center. These are certainly steps in the right direction. But Pyongyang continues to insist that the United States must "give up its hostile policy" before any deal can be finalized.

Washington has also taken positive steps relative to its position last year. Now it is willing to participate in providing North Korea multilateral security assurances. It is even willing to grant some economic concessions. But it continues to cling to two substantial preconditions. First, it insists that North Korea must admit to having two nuclear weapons programs, one based on plutonium and the other on uranium. Secondly, Washington demands that Pyongyang publicly agree to "verifiably" dismantle all its

nuclear programs. These demands remain as formidable barriers to a “peaceful diplomatic solution.”

But let us look beyond the obvious. Despite the gap between them, Washington and Pyongyang now are engaged much more in dialogue than hostile confrontation. They are doing so only because the dialogue serves their interests. Neither side wants war while both certainly prefer peace. Both sides also now have a clear idea of what the other side wants in terms of a negotiated settlement. They also know what the other parties – Beijing, Moscow, Seoul and Tokyo – want – both peace and a negotiated settlement.

The six party talks have put Washington and Pyongyang in a diplomatic box. This is good for peace. Washington has had to back away from coercive tactics, such as escalating the Proliferation Security Initiative or threatening to unleash its “military option.” Pyongyang, on the other hand, has had to back away from “demonstrating” its nuclear deterrence by testing a nuclear weapon. Also, Pyongyang has agreed to return to international monitoring of some of its nuclear activities.

The problem, obviously, is how to achieve everyone’s goal of a peaceful nuclear free Korean Peninsula. Washington and Pyongyang now appear to be looking for the “bottom line.” Each is posturing to find out the other side’s price of a final deal. Pyongyang is out to give up as little as possible in exchange for as many concessions as possible. Washington is trying to do the exact opposite. This is reassuring because it falls within the realm of seeking a “peaceful diplomatic solution.”

Obviously, profound problems persist, but prospects for peace have also improved. Next steps remain unclear. Continuation of quiet diplomacy via official diplomatic channels seems most likely. This is fine because it is much more likely to yield positive results than the previous two brief, highly visible meetings in Beijing. Washington can be expected to increase pressure on Pyongyang. One way to do so is by revealing evidence, if it has gained credible proof from Pakistan, of North Korea’s highly enriched uranium program. Pyongyang on the other hand, will try to out maneuver Washington, possibly by trying to weaken Washington-Tokyo cooperation. It might try to do this by striking a deal with Tokyo regarding the abducted Japanese.

Actually, the possible moves by Washington and Pyongyang would be quite acceptable since they fall within the realm of diplomatic negotiation. Likewise, resolution of the abducted Japanese issue would be a very positive development because it would further reduce tensions in Northeast Asia by resolving another highly contentious issue.