

## **Pyongyang's Dilemma – Libyan Solution or Iraqi Option**

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China's persistence is sustaining the Six Party diplomatic process. At the end of April, China scored another success when it announced that Six Party "working group talks" will convene in Beijing on May 12. One month earlier, the situation looked bleak. February's Six Party talks seemed destined to accomplish nothing. But China again intervened and rallied support for "working group" talks, plus another plenary session of the Six Party Talks in June. Ever since, Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington have been engaged in quiet, albeit intense diplomacy. The only concrete accomplishment so far has been more diplomatic chatter. Nevertheless, tensions in Northeast Asia remain subdued and attention remains focused on diplomacy rather than confrontational saber rattling.

### **"Libyan" or "Iraqi" Options**

All the concerned capitals have welcomed the news about the working level talks. After all, they prefer a "peaceful diplomatic" solution. But the rigid positions of Washington and Pyongyang continue to obstruct progress. During February's talks, President Bush reportedly vented his frustration with Pyongyang by ordering the US delegation to warn North Korea that his administration is running out of patience. Vice President Chaney reiterated this to China's leaders during his mid-April visit to Beijing. Meanwhile, ranking Bush Administration officials have said publicly that Pyongyang has only two options. Either it pursues the "Libyan solution" or the US will deploy its "Iraqi" option. In other words, Pyongyang must either accept, without precondition or any concessions, "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) of all of its nuclear programs. Otherwise, Pyongyang will risk war with the United States.

### **"Iraqi Option" Deferred, Temporarily**

Fortunately for all the concerned parties, parallel developments are keeping Washington and Pyongyang focused on diplomacy. China, with help from Seoul and Moscow, continues to nudge Kim Jong Il toward the realization that a diplomatic solution, more than a nuclear arsenal, will secure his regime's survival. Beijing's effort in this regard was quite evident during Kim Jong Il's mid-April surprise visit to Beijing. Meanwhile, Seoul has continued both its policy of economic cooperation with Pyongyang and linkage of the aid's continuation to North Korea's ultimate nuclear disarmament. Similarly, Tokyo continues to quietly tell Pyongyang that it can expect substantial economic aid, but only after it has released the family members of the abducted Japanese citizens and accepted CVID.

In Washington, the Bush Administration's preoccupation with Iraq is preventing President Bush from asserting his "Iraqi" option in Northeast Asia. The Iraqi insurgency and failure to locate Al Qaeda leader Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan are preventing the United States from regrouping its military forces. This, more than any verbal security assurances, is restraining the United States from reconstituting its "military" or "Iraqi" option in Northeast Asia.

### **Ticking Clock**

This is good news not just for Pyongyang, but for all the other concerned capitals, particularly Seoul and Tokyo. No one wants a second Korean War. After all, the price would far exceed the cost of any diplomatic solution. But the clock is ticking. Developments in Iraq and the US Presidential election suggest that Pyongyang would be wise to work out a deal now rather than later. President Bush is determined to "stay the course" in Iraq. Reinforcing US resolve is the support of Britain, Japan, South Korea and other US allies. Prospects remain very good that US military might, backed by that of its allies, will eventually prevail over the Iraq insurgency.

At the same time, prospects for President Bush's reelection remain good. Problems at home and abroad - the economy, insurgency and casualties in Iraq, and budget woes - worry the Bush Administration. But Bush still has six months to deal with these problems before the presidential election. Bush can be expected to confront Kim Jong Il with his "Iraqi" option, if he wins re-election.

Even if Bush were to lose, his apparent Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry, is unlikely to radically alter United States policies toward Iraq and North Korea. Kerry might allow more time and demonstrate more flexibility to achieve a negotiated settlement with Pyongyang. But he has already made clear that he shares Bush's determination to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons.

Hopefully, the Six Party Talks have convinced North Korea that its neighbors, not just the distant United States, insist that Pyongyang reform and give up its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Waiting will not resolve Pyongyang's dilemma. The longer Pyongyang holds out, the greater the chances that the United States will be able to regroup its military forces, regardless of who is in the White House. But as long as the Six Party Talks process continues to make progress, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia will be able to keep both the United States and North Korea focused on diplomacy rather than war.