

**The Six Party Talks and Prime Minister Koizumi's
Second Pyongyang Summit
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Prime Minister Koizumi's forthcoming May 22, 2004 second summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang could breath new life into the Six Party Talks. Last week's Six Party working level talks in Beijing confirmed that the diplomatic process of seeking a peaceful solution to the nuclear impasse with North Korea is stalled. Washington and Pyongyang remain adamant in their respective positions. Unless the impediments to progress are soon removed, tensions in Northeast Asia could once again intensify. In short, despite the relative calm since the Six Party Talks first convened almost one year ago, the possibility of war on the Korean Peninsula persists. The threat of a second Korean War certainly is not imminent, but the lack of substantive progress is eroding confidence in diplomacy's ability to resolve this second Korean nuclear crisis.

China had urged the convening of "working level talks" after February's unproductive plenary round for two reasons. First, Beijing was intent upon perpetuating the dialogue, thus preventing a resumption of escalating tension between Washington and Pyongyang. The other participants shared a similar goal. Beijing's second aim was to shift the dialogue to a more informal format in the hope that this would encourage greater candor and improve prospects for the participants' to find more common ground. Neither, however, was achieved last week.

Expressions of frustration with diplomacy are certain to grow louder and more frequent, particularly in Washington. President Bush during the February round vented his frustration with the lack of progress by cautioning the talks' participants that he was growing impatient with the Six Party process. Vice President reportedly expressed similar sentiments during his mid-April meetings in Beijing with China's leaders. Even China's leaders displayed impatience by inviting Kim Jong Il to Beijing in late April.

The outcome of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's visit seemed to temper Washington's frustration. Pyongyang promised to remain engaged in the talks and suggested it was willing to respond with greater flexibility if Washington did so. But this refreshed optimism was short lived. The only important outcome of the May 12-15 working level talks was an apparent agreement between the participants to continue their diplomatic dialogue. The failure of last week's talks to accomplish any substantive progress dashed this refreshed optimism and further eroded confidence in the multilateral process.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang set out to demonstrate that secret, bilateral talks with it could produce results. If all goes according to the agreed upon scenario for the May 22 summit in Pyongyang, Prime Minister Koizumi will bring to Tokyo with him the five family members of the former abducted Japanese citizens. For Koizumi, this will be a very

significant diplomatic accomplishment which he hopes will translate into success for his party in July's Diet upper house election. He will not have resolved all aspects of the abduction issue, but he will at least have defused its most emotionally charged aspect.

Viewed from Pyongyang's perspective, it will only gain by releasing the five hapless individuals to rejoin their families that now reside in Japan. Pyongyang can claim to Beijing that the new Japanese-DPRK summit is concrete evidence of its willingness to resolve peacefully through diplomacy differences with its neighbors. Most importantly for Pyongyang, it probably hopes to demonstrate to Washington the merits of direct bilateral negotiations with it. At the same time, Pyongyang most likely hopes its cooperation with Tokyo will encourage other participants in the Six Party Talks to pressure the United States to engage North Korea in bilateral talks.

None of Pyongyang's hopes is necessarily bad. All of them indicate its preference to resolve complex problems vis a vis diplomatic negotiations rather than its more traditional style of coercive diplomacy. At the same time, Pyongyang's persistence regarding direct bilateral talks with the United States strongly hints that it is seeking a "face saving" way out of the diplomatic box that it has put itself into. Beginning in October 2002, Pyongyang carried out a series of steps that estranged it from the international community, including its long time allies China and Russia. But before it can erase those missteps, it needs a face saving reason for doing so. Consequently, it has concentrated on winning something in the area of procedure rather than substance. After all, Pyongyang has already and repeatedly said it would dismantle its nuclear program and agree to a resumption of international inspections in exchange for appropriate compensation. After all, the cornerstone of any diplomatic agreement is the exchange of concessions.

But Washington does not seem willing or able to accurately read Pyongyang intentions. Instead, it adamantly attempts to compel Pyongyang's submission to its will. This only intensifies Pyongyang resolve not to bow to Washington. Thus the impasse persists.

Prime Minister Koizumi's handling of the abducted Japanese issue, however, is demonstrating to Washington the concrete benefits of bilateral diplomacy when it comes to dealing with Pyongyang. In short, if you allow Pyongyang to save its "face" by dealing directly with it, and responding to some of its urgent needs, diplomacy can attain one's desired goals. President Bush would do well to take note of Prime Minister Koizumi's dealings with Kim Jong Il. This would not necessarily result in a quick resolution of the nuclear issue, but it would improve prospects for restarting progress toward a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the issue. In the end, peace is everyone's priority.