

North Korea's Multilateral Strategy in the Six Party Talks

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The Six Party Talks are deadlocked, in spite of Secretary of State Powell's recent claim that the "Six Party Talks process is working." There has not been any significant progress toward a diplomatic solution since the talks commenced last August. Initially, North Korea was on the defensive. Five of the six parties (China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States) agreed that North Korea had to give up its nuclear programs and dismantle its nuclear arsenal. Surprisingly, the small and economically feeble North Korea has not succumbed to the combined diplomatic pressure of the much larger and powerful United States and China. Here we explore why.

Unyielding Postures

Washington and Pyongyang reiterated their positions at the May 12-14 Six Party "working level talks" in Beijing. Washington continues to demand that Pyongyang accept "CVID," or "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of all nuclear programs." Only then would President Bush consider giving his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong Il security assurances.

Pyongyang has adamantly rejected this. Since last December, it has claimed that it will "freeze" its nuclear program, but only in exchange for several concessions that include: heavy fuel oil (500,000 metric tons as promised under the now defunct 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework), the end of US economic sanctions, its removal from the US terrorist list and the normalization of US-DPRK relations. At the same time, Pyongyang continues to deny that it has a highly enriched uranium program (HEU).

Major reasons for the continuing deadlock are the shortcomings of President Bush's "multilateral" strategy and North Korea's adroit diplomatic maneuvering to counter it with its own multilateral diplomacy.

President Bush's Multilateral Offensive

The Bush Administration joined the Six Party Talks to push a "multilateral approach" that it claimed is aimed at achieving a "peaceful, diplomatic solution." From the beginning, Washington has pursued a two prong strategy designed to put Pyongyang in a diplomatic vice. Washington remains intent upon using the Six Party Talks to concentrate the combined diplomatic pressure of Beijing, Moscow, Seoul and Tokyo on Pyongyang. At the same time, Washington is determined to rally international support for its Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Washington believes that the export of ballistic missiles, illegal drugs and other internationally outlawed contraband is a major

source of income for Pyongyang. By disrupting this trade, Washington hopes to further weaken North Korea's economy.

President Bush and his closest advisers believe they can compel North Korea's Kim Jong Il to choose between unilaterally and voluntarily disarmament, which could him the economic assistance he needs to save his regime, or risks economic and diplomatic isolation which the Bush Administration believes will end Kim's rule.

Washington's Faulty Assumptions

President Bush's "multilateralism" makes three assumptions, all of which are highly debatable. The first is that China, because it shares Washington's goal of a nuclear free Korean Peninsula, will pressure North Korea into submission. The second assumption is that North Korea's economy is on the verge of collapse. Finally, Washington is convinced that Kim Jong Il will do anything to perpetuating his regime, including avoiding war with the United States.

China does share Washington's goal, but there are limits to the extent it will push Kim Jong Il. It wants Kim's regime to survive but also undergo a gradual transformation. Beijing opposes regime change in North Korea and since 1999 has provided North Korea in amounts sufficient to prevent the regime's collapse. This aid, plus that of the international community, and South Korea aid and intra-Korean trade, undercut Washington's assumption that Pyongyang's economy will soon collapse. Also, Kim Jong Il is determined to perpetuate his rule, but whether he would bow to Washington to do so is a very dubious assumption.

Kim Jong Il's Multilateral Counter Offensive

Meanwhile, North Korea is pursuing its own two prong multilateral strategy. One is concentrates on addressing the Six Party Talks participants' primary concern - North Korea's nuclear program. The other prong focuses on countering improving bilateral relations with Tokyo and Seoul while remaining on good terms with Beijing and Moscow. Pyongyang's short term aim is to deflect multilateral pressure on it back onto Washington in the hope of pressuring it into direct bilateral talks. Toward this end, Pyongyang has demonstrated a willing to make concessions to Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul.

North Korea quickly realized after the Six Party Talks' first round that insistence on retaining its "nuclear deterrence" could estrange it from the international community, including China, Russia and South Korea. Pyongyang promptly adjusted its position to retain good ties with China. This required giving Beijing what it sought most - Pyongyang's willingness to negotiate an end to its nuclear program. Last December, Pyongyang moved to further assure Beijing, as well as Moscow and Seoul, of its intention to negotiate. It offered to phase out its nuclear weapons program, but first it wanted Washington to engage it in direct, bilateral negotiations and to promise to provide inducements as part of a "package deal."

Pyongyang reaped two major benefits when the Bush Administration rejected this proposal. Pyongyang's proposal apparently convinced Beijing that Pyongyang is earnest about a "peaceful diplomatic" end to its nuclear program. Secondly, Washington's rejection weakened, in the eyes of other Six Party Talks participants, the credibility of President Bush's claim of wanting a negotiated settlement. Since last December, China appears to be intent upon striking a balance between inducing and pressuring North Korea and the United States in the hope of fostering common ground between them and setting the stage for bilateral negotiations.

Pyongyang's Overture to Tokyo

Pyongyang recently shifted its focus to Tokyo and Seoul. Regarding Tokyo, Pyongyang appears intent on assuaging the Japanese people's furor over its prior abduction of Japanese citizens. Pyongyang appears to have a second goal - demonstrating to other Six Party Talks participants, especially the United States, that direct bilateral negotiations and the exchange of concessions can resolve even the most sensitive issues.

Since the first Koizumi-Kim Jong Il summit in September 2002, Japan has pressed North Korea to allow the five family members of former abducted Japanese to join their kinsmen in Japan. Unlike the Bush Administration, Japan and the DPRK have conducted secret bilateral talks about this issue which set the stage for the second Japan-DPRK summit on May 22, 2004. Koizumi returned from the summit with five of the six immediate relatives of former abducted Japanese. Only the American Army deserter Charles Jenkins remains in North Korea. (He is the husband of one of the former Japanese abductees and the father of two of the children who accompanied Koizumi to Tokyo on May 22.) In exchange, Japan will provide North Korea 250,000 metric tons of food grain.

The second summit has yielded mixed results for both governments. In Tokyo, the summit's outcome is a significant step toward resolution of the abduction issue. Japanese public opinion polls indicate increased popular support for Prime Minister Koizumi. This enhances prospects for his political party members' success in the July parliamentary election. Emotionally charged criticism of Koizumi and North Korea continues, however, particularly among the relatives of the abducted Japanese. Koizumi is being criticized for not getting North Korea to reveal the details surrounding the deaths of several abducted Japanese who died while in North Korea. Also growing claims that far more Japanese had been abducted than previously reported are further complicating the issue.

North Korea's overture most likely will fall short of Pyongyang's expectations. Bilateral Japan-DPRK relations remain estranged. Relations are not likely to warm soon pending North Korea's agreement to take additional steps to address the abduction issue. Also, full normalization will have to await resolution of the nuclear and related issues. What impact, if any, there may be on the Six Party Talks remains unclear. Pyongyang most likely hopes Japan will urge Washington to engage Pyongyang in direct talks but whether Japan will do so remains unclear.

Pyongyang's Peace Offer to Seoul

Meanwhile, Pyongyang initiated a peace offensive aimed primarily at Seoul. On May 12, just as the Six Party working level talks were getting underway in Beijing, Pyongyang's diplomatic liaison to Washington Ambassador Han Song-ryol, who is accredited to North Korea's mission to the United Nations in New York, made a rare press interview. On instructions from his capital, Han said his government is willing to engage the United States in peace talks aimed at replacing the Korean War Armistice with a new "peace mechanism."

During his interview, Han used "peace mechanism" and "peace treaty" interchangeably. This was not a "new policy," Han admitted, but rather "new emphasis on an old policy." Pyongyang first promised to formulate a peace treaty with South Korea in their 1991 South-North Joint Agreement on Reconciliation, Economic Cooperation and Exchange. Two years later, North Korea's army declared in April 1993 that the Korean War Armistice was void, and called upon the United States to engage in bilateral talks to forge a new "peace mechanism" to replace it. But all the while, North Korea dismissed any possibility of convening "three party peace talks" that brought together Pyongyang, Washington and Seoul.

But the May 12 offer, Pyongyang claimed it would engage in "peace treaty" talks with "those nations that have troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula," a phrase Han used repeatedly in his May 12 interview. When pressed to explain this, Han specified that only three nations now have troops on the peninsula: the United States, South and North Korea. According to Han, Pyongyang, for the first time, is saying officially that it is willing to include Seoul peace talks between Washington and Pyongyang. If this accurately reflects North Korea's policy, Pyongyang is making a major concession to Seoul and Washington..

Again, Pyongyang appears to have a dual goal in mind. Its immediate aim is to entice Seoul into urging Washington to engage Pyongyang in bilateral talks. Pyongyang's second aim appears to be the initiation of a process that will ultimately defuse the United States' alleged "hostile policy" by ending the technical state of war that has existed between Washington and Pyongyang since the Korean War began in 1950.

As with Japan, the extent to which this overture may benefit Pyongyang remains to be seen. Neither Seoul nor Washington has reacted to the proposal. When the proposal was made, Seoul was preoccupied with the Supreme Court decision to re-instate Roh Moo-hyun as president. Washington was focused on Iraq, particularly the Iraqi prisoner abuse situation. In Tokyo, Prime Minister Koizumi was focused on his summit with Kim Jong Il.

Conclusion

Pyongyang's multilateral strategy, like Washington's, is achieving mixed results. Nevertheless, Pyongyang's efforts have deflected much diplomatic pressure back on to Washington. Also Pyongyang has frustrated Washington's efforts to isolate it economically. On the other hand, Pyongyang has had to make significant concessions to China regarding participation in the Six Party Talks, to Japan regarding the abduction issue and to Seoul concerning future peace treaty talks. Ultimately, Pyongyang seems determined to resolve the nuclear impasse through direct, bilateral negotiations with the United States. This suggests that Pyongyang is concerned more with procedure than substance and is seeking a face saving way to dismantle its nuclear "deterrence." Washington would do well to recognize the potential benefits to its self and allies if it were to hold bilateral talks with Pyongyang, just as Britain did with Libya.