

Are The Six Party Talks Finished?

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The short answer is that the Six Party talks are not finished. Nor have they failed to achieve their goal of a peaceful, diplomatic way to make the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. Obviously, however, there has not been any real progress toward a resolution for nearly one year. Nevertheless, all the concerned nations (China, North and South Korea, the United States, Japan and Russia) continue their intense diplomatic dialogue about the nuclear issue. The main difference now, compared to June 2004, is that these nations have not yet agreed to meet again in Beijing. Instead, they are now concentrating on conducting “quiet” diplomacy through confidential diplomatic channels.

So long as “quiet” diplomacy persists, prospects remain fairly good that the Six Party Talks will eventually resume. Also, at least the situation will remain calm. Tensions between Washington and Pyongyang can be restrained, and prospects for continuing peace in Northeast Asia will continue to be much better than if the diplomatic dialogue had stopped completely. All of this is vital for the continuation of the region’s dynamic economic activity and improving prosperity.

Also on the plus side is the fact that all the parties remain hopeful that they will again gather in Beijing to work together on a diplomatic solution. Each concerned government has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to continue in the talks. This was one of the main themes of U.S. Secretary of State Rice’s recent visit to Northeast Asia. Even Pyongyang has repeatedly reiterated that its “principled position” is to return to the Six Party Talks. North Korea has sent two high level delegations to China during the past month to confirm this intention and continues to promise in official statements of its Foreign Ministry that it will return to the Six Party Talks.

Unlike the other participants, however, Pyongyang also asserts preconditions for its return. It insists there first must be a “mature atmosphere,” and that the U.S. must demonstrate its “sincerity” by apologizing for Dr. Rice’s January 18, 2005 claim that North Korea is an “outpost of tyranny.” Pyongyang’s hope for such an U.S. apology is unrealistic. But North Korea’s typical negotiating strategy is to demand far more than it can realistically expect to receive. Eventually, Pyongyang usually accepts less than it originally demanded. In the end, Pyongyang wins. It gets less than it demanded, but wins more than it originally possessed.

As a matter of fact, Beijing and Washington are working intently now to induce Pyongyang to return to the talks. China already has made clear that it will continue its long term strategy of maintaining balance in its relations with the two Koreas. South Korea benefits in the form of highly profitable trade with China. At the same time, North Korea benefits because of China's generous aid in the form of oil, grain and investment capital. South Korea meanwhile continues its economic cooperation policy toward North Korea. The most active element of this policy is the continuing development of the Kaesong Industrial Project.

But Pyongyang is holding out for something additional before it agrees to return to the Six Party Talks. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has made clear through his senior diplomats and government's official announcements that he is waiting for "face saving" gestures from both China and the United States. China's gesture appears to have been agreed upon in the form of a visit by Chinese leader Hu Jindao to North Korea. The visit's timing has yet to be decided, but this most likely will be settled quickly once Pyongyang publicly pledges that it is ready to return to the Six Party Talks.

On the other hand, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il is waiting for President Bush to make a "face saving" gesture. Late last December, North Korea's number two man Kim Yong-nam told a visiting US Congressman that it wanted the Bush Administration to stop using insulting rhetoric that belittled North Korea's political leader and his political system. But then Dr. Rice outraged Pyongyang's leadership when on January 18, 2005 she listed North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny." To prove their loyalty and esteem for their "great leader" Kim Jong Il, Pyongyang powerful generals and senior civilian officials now demand that the Bush Administration apologize. These officials know that such an apology is politically impossible for the Bush Administration. Pyongyang might drop this demand if Washington were to offer an alternative friendly gesture.

Such an "olive branch" might consist of the Bush Administration offering to resume direct diplomatic dialogue with Pyongyang. There are quiet indications in Washington that the Bush Administration is considering an arrangement whereby Pyongyang would agree to return to the Six Party Talks in exchange for the resumption of direct bilateral diplomatic dialogue.

In short, the present situation is preferable, particularly for Japan and South Korea, because peace prevails and business continues without disruption. However, if Washington and Pyongyang fail to formulate a face saving accommodation in the next couple of months, the Six Party Talks could end without achieving any concrete progress. Tensions in Northeast Asia would again escalate and the possibility of a second Korean War would again increase. Fortunately, patience and quiet diplomacy are now sustaining peace, and the hope of a diplomatic solution persists.

If and when the Six Party Talks resume, however, the attainment of a diplomatic solution is certain to be more difficult than one year ago. But this is a topic for a future essay.