

Eulogy for the Six Party Talks

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The time has come to eulogize the Six Party Talks. One year has passed since the participants proudly and confidently issued their “Joint Statement on North Korea’s Nuclear Program” on September 19, 2005. Immediately, the United States and North Korea resumed their squabbling by setting forth their own prerequisites for the accord’s implementation. Despite intense diplomatic effort by Seoul and Beijing, neither constructive dialogue nor progress toward implementation has been achieved ever since.

In short, the Six Party Talks are deadlocked, not just stalled, and are unlikely to resume in the near future. Our concern here is whether the dead lock can be broken and, if in fact the talks do not resume, then what are the future options for dealing with the unstable situation on the Korean Peninsula.

The September 11, 2005 Six Party Joint Statement

Let us revisit the joint statement. Representatives of China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States proclaimed that, “For the cause of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia,” and “in the spirit of mutual respect,” had agreed to:

- “the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner,”
- “The DPRK committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards.”
- ***The DPRK stated that it has the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The other parties expressed their respect and agreed to discuss, at an appropriate time, the subject of the provision of light water reactor to the DPRK.***
- The DPRK and the United States undertook to respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies.

Alas, rancor between Washington and Pyongyang promptly enveloped this optimistic statement.

Washington's Official Reaction

The United States government, reflecting the deep division in the Bush Administration, had two responses to the joint statement, initial acceptance by the Department of State followed by qualified acceptance by the White House. The US chief delegate rather naively believed that he and his astute team had achieved a major diplomatic breakthrough that was consistent with President Bush's long avowed goal of achieving a "peaceful diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear programs." Actually, the terms of the joint statement had outraged so-called hardliners in the Bush Administration. These included Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Steven Hadley and State Department Under Secretary for International Security Affairs Robert Joseph. They found the statement to similar to the accord that the Clinton Administration had forged with North Korea in 1994, the Agreed Framework.

The day after the 2005 joint statement's public release, Hill was directed to read a statement written in Washington that qualified the United States' acceptance of the Beijing statement. The Six Part statement agreed "to take coordinated steps to implement the afore-mentioned consensus in a phased manner in line with the principle of commitment for commitment, action for action." Washington's statement qualified this by demanding that North Korea **first** comprehensively declare and completely, verifiably and irreversibly eliminate all its past and present nuclear programs and all nuclear weapons. North Korea, Washington demanded, must also return to the NPT and "come into full compliance with IAEA safeguards, including by taking all steps that may be deemed necessary to verify the correctness and completeness of the DPRK's declarations of nuclear materials and activities. "When these conditions have been met," Hill emphasized, the United States would then "support such a decision" to discuss the "provision of a light water reactor" to the DPRK.

Hill's statement then reiterated the United States' long standing preconditions for the normalization of bilateral, "The United States desires to completely normalize relations with the DPRK, but as a necessary part of discussions, we look forward to sitting down with the DPRK to address other important issues. They outstanding issues include human rights abuses, biological and chemical weapons programs ballistic missile programs and proliferation, terrorism and illicit activities. These issues are identical with those listed previously by the Clinton Administration except for the addition of "illicit activities."

Despite their rhetoric, unfortunately, neither North Korea nor the United States appears eager to resume the talks. Both sides for months have repeatedly avowed their intention to return to the talks, but at the same time reiterated preconditions each knows that the other side will continue to reject. One can only conclude that their posturing is designed to burden the other side with blamed for the stalemate. Simultaneously, the two sides have taken steps that virtually ensure the other side will not return to the Six Party Talks. Let's examine the rhetoric first, and then the actions of each side since September 2005.