

HAS WASHINGTON GIVEN UP ON THE SIX PARTY TALKS? – future use

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones
Professor of Korean Studies
Akita International University

For
Mainichi Shimbun

The Six Party Talks are on the verge of collapse. Three and one half years of intensive diplomacy has not produced significant progress toward a peaceful diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Twice the participants issued statements that outline shared goals. In September 2005, they issued their most ambitious pledge, the September 19 Joint Statement. So far the statement has remained more dream than reality. If anything, the talks have been on a slippery slope toward fading into history. Even if the talks resume in the near future, prospects for a negotiated solution remain bleak.

The problem is not the talks' format. For the first time in history, the world's four most powerful nations: China, Japan, Russia and the United States have joined the two Koreas to achieve common goals. These powerful and prominent nations' joint effort has created an atmosphere conducive to achieving a negotiated resolution. Their efforts have also perpetuated the region's awesome economic dynamism by restraining tensions and preserving peace in Northeast Asia. Nevertheless, ending North Korea's nuclear programs and forging a peace treaty to end the Korean War remain elusive hopes.

The fundamental obstacles are found in Washington and Pyongyang, not elsewhere. Here we concentrate on Washington, D.C. In a subsequent essay, we will look at Pyongyang.

Since the talks began in the summer of 2003, the Bush Administration has blamed all the participants except itself for the lack of progress. Washington has faulted Beijing's willingness to aid rather than squeeze Pyongyang economically. It has criticized Seoul's pursuit of reconciliation rather than confrontation with Pyongyang. And the Bush Administration has dismissed Moscow's contribution as impotent and ineffective. Only Tokyo seems to measure up to Washington's expectations.

All the while, the Bush Administration has vacillated between diplomatic dialogue and coercive tactics. While repeatedly proclaiming that he is earnest in his pursuit of a "peaceful diplomatic resolution," President Bush and his senior advisers have belittled and berated North Korea. He has proclaimed it a member of an "axis of evil," and accused its leader of being a "tyrant" who "starves his people while building nuclear weapons." Vice President Cheney has echoed similar themes. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has labeled North Korea an "outpost of tyranny." Then in December

2005, the Bush Administration's ambassador to Seoul, Korea proclaimed North Korea to be a "criminal state." Such rhetoric only destroys an atmosphere conducive to successful diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the Bush Administration has mixed promises of bountiful diplomatic and economic inducements with demands that North Korea "completely, verifiably, irreversibly dismantle" all of its nuclear programs, civilian and military. Otherwise, as President Bush and his representatives have repeatedly asserted, the United States will pursue other, unspecified options.

Such mixed tactics play into the hands of Pyongyang's "hard liners." They seize on this duplicity in Washington's tactics as evidence for their conviction that the United States cannot be trusted, practices a "hostile policy" toward North Korea and is intent upon "squeezing" its government into collapse.

The Bush Administration appears to have shifted its tactics once again beginning in the fall of 2005. Until then, Washington alternated between diplomatic dialogue and coercive tactics laced with blunt rhetoric. The State Department was allowed to entice Pyongyang back to the Six Party Talks in July 2005. Washington reopened the "New York channel" that facilitates diplomatic dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang via North Korea's Mission to the United Nations in New York. The new US chief negotiator Ambassador Christopher Hill and his colleagues were permitted to engage their North Korean counterparts "under the umbrella of the Six Party Talks." This meant the two sides could meet whenever and where ever necessary to exchange views related to finding a negotiated end of North Korea's nuclear programs.

But beginning in September 2005, the Bush Administration has turned to simultaneous implementation of its "hard" and "moderate" tactics. A former ranking Bush Administration official, who recently resigned from the National Security Council, even confirmed this had happened during a recent "off the record" public discussion in Washington, D.C. He reiterated that President Bush really wants a peaceful diplomatic solution, but personally detests North Korea's leader and is losing patience with diplomacy. Vice President Chaney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Council director Stephen Hadley are well known to share similar views. State Department Under Secretary for International Security Affairs Robert Joseph has aligned himself with this group. Secretary of State Rice remains committed to pursuing a negotiated settlement, but she has publicly expressed comfortable with applying economic pressure to North Korea (See Barbara Slavin's September 15, 2005 interview with Rice in *USA Today*. Just before the United States concurred with the September 19 Joint Statement, Rice suggested economic sanctions might prove necessary if North Korea did not facilitate progress toward a negotiated settlement.)

Washington's fairly new tactic of simultaneously applying diplomacy and economic sanctions became evident when President Bush authorized the U.S. Treasury Department in September 2005 to impose sanctions on North Korea's banking activities. At the same time, the State Department's negotiators were in Beijing pressing for a deal with

Pyongyang. Ever since, however, Pyongyang has backed away from the Six Party Talks claiming that Washington is trying to coerce it into submission. The Bush Administration loudly and frequently has claimed that the new sanctions, authorized under Section 311 of the Patriot Act, have absolutely no linkage to the Six Party Talks. Washington claims that the sanction's implementation merely happened to coincide with Six Party Talks' related developments. Pyongyang has yet to be convinced of this claim.

Regardless of how the Bush Administration tries to justify its new sanctions, the fact remains that they have shifted the focus away from the Six Party Talks and the priority concern of the other participants – peacefully ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program. At the same time, Pyongyang once again has exploited Washington's resolve to its advantage. The Bush Administration's underlying assumption is that North Korea is on the verge of economic collapse and needs have dueled with one another over issues not directly related to the main issue – North Korea's nuclear program. No matter how the Bush Administration tries to justify its imposition of new sanctions on North Korea, the fact remains that the sanctions have