

**Secret Meeting in New York -
Last Chance for the Six Party Talks?**

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The Bush Administration demonstrated rare diplomatic adroitness when it authorized a secret May 13 meeting in New York between two US diplomats and their North Korean counterparts at the DPRK Mission to the United Nations. Washington hoped the meeting would entice Pyongyang back to the long stalled Six Party Talks. China initiated the talks two years ago to peacefully and diplomatically halt North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. The talks, however, have been stalled since June 2004.

The secret meeting will not end the North Korean nuclear threat, but it achieved some critical steps toward a peaceful diplomatic resolution.

First, the meeting blunts Pyongyang's campaign to discredit the Bush Administration's avowed goal of a "peaceful diplomatic solution" to the nuclear crisis. At the same time, it demonstrated the diplomatic flexibility that China and South Korea have long urged Washington to show. Pyongyang had exploited the Bush Administration's adamant demand that North Korea accept CVID, or complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of its civilian and military nuclear programs. It has also claimed that Bush's "hostile" rhetoric illustrated President Bush's alleged true purpose – to end Kim Jong Il's rule even if it meant using military force.

The secret meeting also gives Kim Jong Il the face saving gestures he has wanted from the United States since December 2004 in exchange for returning to the Six Party Talks. Kim may be a dictator, but his power depends on the continuing support of the leadership of his army and the Korean Workers Party. He must avoid any appearance of bowing to any superpower, especially the United States which North Korea considers the supreme "evil imperialist." Doing so would be seen in Pyongyang as betraying his nation's interests and open Kim to profound criticism.

At the May 13 meeting, President Bush authorized the State Department to give Kim Jong Il two positive gestures. First, Washington offered to reopen the so-called "New York Channel" for substantive bilateral US-DPRK diplomatic dialogue. For Pyongyang, this is a highly significant symbolic gesture that also has important practical consequences. The channel between the Department of State and the DPRK Mission to the United Nations in New York was first opened in June 1993 during the 1993-94 US-DPRK nuclear negotiations. Prior to this time, all US-DPRK official diplomatic contact was restricted to brief meeting in Beijing. The "New York channel," in Pyongyang's eyes, was the first important step toward the normalization

of relations with the United States. But when the Bush Administration closed it to substantive dialogue in June 2004, North Korea saw this conclusive evidence that the United States had reverted to its pre-1993 “hostile” policy.

The Bush Administration’s closing of the New York channel in December 2004 also rendered North Korea’s Foreign Ministry impotent when it came to advising Kim Jong Il how to deal with the United States. Lacking contact with the Department of State, the Foreign Ministry had little information to report to North Korea’s head of state and former long time Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam. Kim Yong-nam is one of Kim Jong Il’s most trusted mentors and advisors. This meant that Pyongyang’s hardliners, particularly its generals, could virtually monopolize advising Kim Jong Il. This could explain North Korea’s increasing reliance on coercive diplomacy in recent months.

At the May 13 meeting, the US diplomats also assured their North Korean counterparts that the US would engage North Korea in direct diplomatic dialogue, but only under the umbrella of the Six Party Talks and only if North Korea returned to the talks. This gave Kim Jong Il another long sought face saving gesture.

Clearly, Washington scored some major gains from the meeting. It blunts Pyongyang’s effort to discredit US intentions in the Six Party Talks, and shifts the focus of other participants’ frustration from Washington to Pyongyang. It intensifies pressure on Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks. Also, the meeting broke the cycle of escalating tension. Since January 18, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called North Korea an “outpost of tyranny,” tensions have steadily risen and prospects for the resuming of the Six Party Talks dimmed. Now quiet diplomacy has more time to restart the stalled negotiations.

At the same time, unfortunately, the meeting is also another indication that the Bush Administration is running out of patience with the Six Party Talks. The meeting could be the final opportunity for moderates in the Bush Administration to keep President Bush focused on diplomacy. If the Six Party Talks do not resume soon, or quickly stall again, President Bush is certain to come under increasing pressure from his hard line advisers like Vice President Chaney to shift to more coercive tactics. This would restart the cycle of escalating tensions. Ultimately, in spite of the May 13 meeting, achieving a peaceful diplomatic solution to the Korean Peninsula’s nuclear woes will remain a distant and extremely difficult goal to achieve.