

Six Party Talks – The US Negotiator’s Faltering Performance

By

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Meeting the April 14, 2007 deadline set at the Six Party negotiations in February is the least important problem facing these negotiations. Negotiators can always reschedule deadlines. More worrisome is Chief US negotiator Christopher Hill’s inability to establish that he has the political authority to fulfill his promises to North Korea. Equally problematic is that Hill’s inability to do so further erodes Pyongyang’s trust in Washington. Without mutual trust, progress toward a peaceful diplomatic end to North Korea’s nuclear programs will be impossible.

The February 13 round of Six Party Talks in Beijing ended on a note of optimism. The participants proudly proclaimed that they had forged a plan that would culminate in the peaceful end of North Korea’s nuclear programs. They set April 14 as the end of phase one of their plan. North Korea promised by that date to shut down its twenty year old nuclear reactor and to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to resume its monitoring of activities at North Korea’s nuclear research center. At the same time, US chief negotiator Hill confidently pledged that the US would swiftly fulfill its part of the bargain: the release of North Korean funds that Washington had frozen almost two years ago based on claims that North Korea was engaging in counterfeiting US currency and other illegal activities.

Ever since, the United States has struggled to fulfill Hill’s promise.

Hill in January and February made promises and public pledges based on excessive personal confidence and a lack of knowledge about US government procedures concerning the release of North Korea’s frozen funds. Hill subsequently admitted to the international press that he had previously spoken out of ignorance. At the same time, however, Hill attempted to gain White House support for his public promise that the funds would promptly be returned to North Korea. He failed to win support. Instead, the White House sided with the Treasury Department’s claim that it alone can determine whether and when the funds might be released.

Hill’s tendency to make inflated public claims exposed the limits of his authority. This is not the first time. In October 2005, shortly after the Six Party Talks produced an earlier agreement, Hill promised his North Korean counterpart that he would visit Pyongyang to discuss the frozen funds issue. When Washington told Hill that he could not make such a

visit, Hill promised Kim Gye Kwan and they could meet in New York to discuss the issue. Again Hill proved unable to fulfill this promise, at least not until two years later when he and Kim met in New York earlier this year.

North Korean brinksmanship clearly has not been the cause of the recent delay in implementing the February 13 accord. Rather, the delay is a consequence of Washington's continuing inability to forge a consistent consensus regarding its policy and strategy for dealing with North Korea and the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. Compounding this problem is Assistant Secretary Hill's eagerness to make excessively optimistic public comments while also making commitments that exceed his authority.

Fortunately for the long term future of the Six Party Talks, the delay in the release of the frozen funds to North Korea appears to be more procedural than political. If this is true, the procedural delay most likely has not caused serious damage to the negotiations.

Also irritating Pyongyang in recent weeks has been the annual US-South Korea joint military exercise that commenced in early March. This is an annual, routine event for the armies of the United States and South Korea. North Korea, however, has for many years refused to engage in negotiations with the United States during such exercises. Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry stated as much in an early March authoritative policy statement that the international press has largely ignored. Once the exercise ends by mid-April, Pyongyang is most likely to resume its participation in the Six Party Talks, if its funds have been unfrozen.

Unfortunately, Assistant Secretary Hill's shortcomings quite likely have complicated relations between Washington and Pyongyang. Hill's inability to deliver on his promises to Kim Gye Kwan quite likely has exposed Kim to criticism in Pyongyang. Hardliners there might be asking, "How can North Korea make a deal with a US negotiator who lacks the political authority to fulfill his promises?" At the same time, Hill's sincerity surely has sustained damage in the eyes of North Korean observers.

Hill would do well to candidly critic his handling of the Six Party Talks. In January and February, he met alone with his North Korean counterparts. This was unfortunate because it prevented him from benefiting from the insights advisers. He is too eager to express his personal assessments to the international press. His public comments may satisfy his thirst for attention, but they do not promote U.S. goals at the negotiations. On the contrary, his frequent and detailed public comments provide his North Korean counterparts valuable insight into his thinking. Finally, Hill must recognize that the most difficult part of diplomatic negotiations are not achieving an agreement, but rather successfully implementing an agreement.

The longer it takes for Hill to become a more effective negotiator, the more time North Korea will have to refine its nuclear capability.