

Six Party Talks Face Many Impediments, But Eventual Success Likely

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The transfer of North Korea's money from Macau to Moscow and Ambassador Hill's recent visit to Pyongyang clear the way for the Six Party Talks to resume, possibly in early July. This is welcome news. Nevertheless, ultimate success in peacefully disarming North Korea of its nuclear weapons will take time, patience, intense diplomacy and significant economic and diplomatic inducements.

President Bush and the Department of State have convincingly demonstrated their determination to sustain the new tactical approach to North Korea launched in January 2007. This was done by accommodating Pyongyang's insistence that the United States not just unfreeze the funds in Macau, but also facilitate the electronic transfer of the approximately \$25 million through the international banking system. The action also confirms that the funds are legitimate. North Korea's demand in this regard was not new, as reported by some media, but had been conveyed to Hill in October 2005.

But the transfer of funds and Hill's Pyongyang visit are only small steps forward in a process that is certain to prove long and difficult. Ultimate success in the Six Party Talks will be possible only so long as both Washington and Pyongyang adhere to the "action for action" and "step by step" process outlined in the Six Party Talks accords. It will require that the U.S. maintain its current emphasis on diplomatic dialogue and the exchange of concessions. Additionally, ultimate success may require that Tokyo make some major adjustments in its current approach to Pyongyang

It would appear that President Bush has made a strategic decision regarding how to deal with North Korea and is not likely to revert to his prior coercive tactics. The continuing US military effort in the Middle East and the "war on terrorism" compelled Bush to make these his top priorities, and to concentrate U.S. military forces in the Middle East. Bush consequently moved to lower the risk of an armed confrontation with North Korea. In this connection, he also made countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which includes North Korea, his second concern. Despite this shift, Bush remains intent on achieving "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" (CVIP) of all North Korean nuclear programs. Nevertheless, Bush's tactical shift opens a gap between Washington and Tokyo's preference for coercive tactics. Eventually this could prove to be a major stumbling block in the implementation process.

At the same time, eventual success requires that Pyongyang fulfill its part of the February 2007 accord by matching Washington with concessions of equal value. Currently the most pressing concern is how soon the DPRK will fulfill its pledge to:

shut down and seal for the purpose of eventual abandonment the Yongbyon nuclear facility, including the reprocessing facility, and invite back the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) personnel to conduct all necessary monitoring and verification as agreed between the IAEA and the DPRK.

Pyongyang has already invited the IAEA to send a delegation to North Korea. This is welcome news, but it is not the most important step Pyongyang must take. There must be prompt agreement with the IAEA regarding the meaning of “all necessary monitoring and verification ...” Pyongyang is certain to try to restrict the IAEA’s activities to a minimum while the IAEA pushes to have maximum access to Yongbyon’s nuclear facilities.

Further complicating these talks, and possibly slowing them, will be North Korea’s emphasis on the fact that it is neither a member of the IAEA nor of the Treaty on the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Pyongyang could insist on receiving additional concessions from Seoul and Washington in exchange for its cooperation with the IAEA.

The best we should expect from Pyongyang is its willingness to allow the IAEA to resume the monitoring activities agreed to under the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework. These activities consisted of shutting down the 5 megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, and the IAEA’s installation of video cameras in key nuclear facilities and the sealing of all doors and windows of select buildings. This may be less than Washington wants. But Washington may have to restrain its expectations if a quick IAEA-North Korea agreement is to be forged. Nevertheless, prospects appear good that acceptable IAEA monitoring will commence by the end of July. After all, both Washington and Pyongyang at this point are intent upon demonstrating to everyone their determination to make the February accord work.

South Korea also can be counted on to promptly supply the energy and food aid it has promised North Korea in exchange for cooperating with the February accord.

A more substantial test of the new accord’s resilience could come in the near future regarding the “terrorism list” issue. One of Pyongyang’s favorite tactics is to cause tensions between its adversaries. In this case, the tensions would be between Tokyo and Washington. Prime Minister Abe has been trying to “internationalize” pressure on North Korea to satisfactorily address the Japanese abduction issue. This was one of his primary reasons for meeting Bush in Washington at the end of April. Clearly, Tokyo opposes North Korea’s removal

from the terrorism list because it would diminish US pressure on Pyongyang to deal with the abduction issue.

Pyongyang however is certain to press Ambassador Hill, sooner or later, on this matter. Very likely it will claim that Hill and Bush must again demonstrate their sincerity and continuing movement away from a “hostile policy” by removing North Korea from the terrorism list. This will confront Washington with a dilemma. Either it must concede what Pyongyang demands to sustain progress toward a peaceful end of the nuclear issue, or Washington will concur with Tokyo’s demands regarding the abduction issue.

Either way, Pyongyang has something to gain. If Washington meets Pyongyang’s demands, North Korea will gain because numerous sanctions will be dropped and some normal bilateral commercial dealings can begin. If Washington keeps Pyongyang on the terrorism list, North Korea can then claim to China that it cannot continue with the Six Party deal’s implementation because of Washington’s alleged sincerity. This would allow North Korea to continue the refinement of its nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals.

No one can say for certain which way Washington may turn regarding the terrorism list. Washington, however, has already made known its preference. Given the choice between achieving its strategic national defense goal of ending North Korea’s nuclear programs or demonstrating sensitivity for Japan’s concerns about its abducted citizens, United States’ national interests could dictate that Washington remove North Korea from the terrorism list. Washington, in the process, may push Pyongyang to give Tokyo something in return, such as releasing the so-call “Yodo” faction of the Japanese Red Army to Japan for trial and punishment. Nevertheless, friction between Washington and Tokyo could ensue.

Clearly the most difficult tasks of implementing the February accord lie ahead. Pyongyang is not in a hurry to complete implementation. From its point of view, the longer implementation takes, the more time it has to refine its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities since these activities are not banned under the new accord. Also, the closer we come to the dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear programs and facilities, the greater the likelihood that Pyongyang will demand more and greater concessions from the United States.

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