

Six Party Talks – The New Agreed Framework?

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For
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September 21, 2005

The Six Party Talks' September 19, 2005 Joint Statement confirms that a new status quo is being forged in Northeast Asia. The Talks' intense diplomacy, a half century after the Korean War and fifteen years after the Cold War's end, is nurturing this new regional consensus, a point made in my previous essay. Peace, prosperity and a nuclear free Korean Peninsula are the shared goals. Multilateral collaboration, not ideological rivalry or armed confrontation, is the preferred process for achieving these objectives, a point evident in the statement's first sentence, "For the cause of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia," the participants agree to achieve the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

Since the Korean War's end, peace and stability in Northeast Asia have been rooted in the Cold War strategy of armed deterrence. This remains starkly evident on the Korean Peninsula where US military supremacy, including its "nuclear umbrella," confronts North Korea's million man army and its previous nuclear umbrella as provided by the Soviet Union and China. Fundamental diplomatic re-alignment in the early 1990s, however, profoundly altered the region's balance of power, causing North Korea to lose its nuclear umbrella after Moscow and Beijing normalized relations with South Korea.

Pyongyang then confronted a strategic choice. It could either build its own nuclear umbrella or discard deterrence to alternatively pursue normal relations with its neighbors and primary antagonist the United States. Pyongyang, possibly because of its severe economic problems, first sought to emulate South Korea by improving relations with its enemies. This set the stage for the 1994 Agreed Framework, the first ever diplomatic agreement between the United States and North Korea.

Eventually, when the Agreed Framework fell short of its intended goals, Pyongyang's strategists reverted to armed deterrence. In 2002, this included a "nuclear deterrence capability." But North Korea quickly learned that this capability actually threatened to estrange it from old allies China and Russia, and new friend South Korea. Without their diplomatic support and economic cooperation, North Korea could not restore economic vitality.

The Six Party Talks again confronted Pyongyang with the same stark choice it had faced in 1992-93. Either it could continue to rely on Kim Jong Il's "military first" strategy or

revert to his father's program of normalizing diplomatic and commercial relations so North Korea could modernize its economy. In June 2005, Kim Jong Il indicated his preference for his father's strategy. But first the United States' preference for perpetuating the Cold War status quo had to be dismantled.

The Bush Administration since 2001 has pursued a "neo-containment" strategy designed to preserve its military supremacy on the Korean Peninsula, to discredit the legitimacy of the Pyongyang government and to isolate North Korea from the international community. North Korea's prior misconduct regarding its nuclear ambitions served as the strategy's cornerstone. Ever since, the Bush Administration has been intent upon coercing North Korea to submit to its will rather negotiating a deal with it.

The Six Party Talks' joint statement rejects Washington's coercive tactics. Instead, it sets the stage for pursuing Pyongyang's preference for forging a new status quo in Northeast Asia. North Korea claims it will give up all nuclear programs and submit again to the requirements of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This is a long sought US priority. But in exchange, Pyongyang is promised virtually all that it has long sought: security assurances, respect for its sovereignty, including its right to have a peaceful nuclear program, normalized diplomatic relations and extensive economic assistance. It is also promised a new "permanent peace regime" to replace the Korean War Armistice, something Pyongyang has been advocating in the face of United States' opposition since the early 1990s. Pyongyang even won concurrence for implementation "in a phased manner," another objective.

Many factors eroded the Bush Administration's once adamant and often arrogant stance at the Beijing talks. Washington's coercive tactics put the US at odds with the other participants. Their consistent priority has been attaining a diplomatic solution and avoiding another Korean War. Washington's threats to activate the Proliferation Security Initiative and to leave the talks and raise the issue in the UN Security Council estranged the US from the other parties. Sensing this, Pyongyang apparently decided it had more to gain by promising to discard its nuclear programs. Given a choice between Pyongyang's offer and Washington's intransigence, Beijing, Moscow and Seoul favored North Korea preferences. Washington obviously realized that reverting to the UN could prove embarrassingly futile. Also, it finally admitted as unsustainable its opposition North Korea's claim of a "sovereign right" to build a peaceful nuclear program. This right is prominently stated in the NPT, a treaty which the United States helped write and has long advocated.

Possibly most decisive in compelling President Bush to sanction the joint statement was his recognition that the United States could not risk contending with another crisis. US military resources are over extended because of the global war on terrorism and the continuing conflict in Iraq. At home, huge resources are needed to deal with the consequences of Hurricane Katrina. Politically, President Bush faces unprecedented criticism from the American public and in the US Congress. These factors, combined

with the candid admonitions of the Six Party Talks' participants, appear to have convinced President Bush that there are limits to the United States' power.

Nevertheless, the joint statement is more a wish list than a plan of action. The new status quo and a denuclearized Korean Peninsula remain more hope than reality. Obviously, the Six Party Talks are far from finished. Yet, undeniably, the diplomatic process continues its slow but steady progress toward a peaceful solution.