

**The Six Party Talks –
The View from Pyongyang**

**By
C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.
Former U.S. State Department
North Korea Officer**

**For
*Mainichi Shimbun***

September 16, 2007

The Six Party Talks between Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington to end North Korea's nuclear will soon resume. Progress toward achieving the six parties' goal has been and continues to be uneven. Here we assess the talks from Pyongyang's point of view.

The basic aim of North Korea's negotiators is to achieve significant gains for minimal concessions. The year 2007 has been the best year for Pyongyang since China initiated the talks in 2003. Beginning in January, 2007, Pyongyang's chief negotiator Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Gye-kwan has achieved one of his government's foremost tactical goals since the Bush Administration assumed office in 2001: engage Washington in bilateral negotiations. After six years of persistent effort, Washington's chief negotiator Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill initiated a continuing series of bilateral negotiations with his North Korean counterpart that began in Berlin in January. Ever since, Hill and Kim have met with increasing frequency in New York, Beijing, Shenyang and even in Pyongyang.

Their meetings have been and continue to be more than opportunities to exchange views, which characterized earlier bilateral US-DPRK meetings. Beginning in Berlin, the two senior diplomats negotiated the details of a simultaneous exchange of concessions aimed at eventually ending North Korea's nuclear programs. This achieved for Pyongyang a second major tactical goal in 2007 – convincing Washington that it must induce it into cooperation by offering it concessions equivalent in value to what President Bush expects North Korea to give him. Prior to 2007, the Bush Administration adamantly rejected North Korea's insistence on exchanging concessions.

Pyongyang has achieved a third tactical objective: manage the pace toward the time when it is expected to give up its nuclear arsenal. Washington for years has been demanding an "all or nothing" time table. But the February 2007 Six Party accord adopts Pyongyang's schedule of a phased sequence of simultaneous steps and the initiation of working group discussions. Pyongyang ever since has determined the pace of progress. Between February and July it even held up implementation of the accord's first phase by insisting that the United States first had to release and then facilitate the transfer of its previously frozen funds from the *Banco Delta Alpha*.

Pyongyang now maintains control over the pace of progress by insisting that Washington first drop it from the terrorism list and phase out economic sanctions before it will disable its nuclear equipment and provide a list of all its nuclear programs and facilities.

In addition to achieving these three tactical objectives, Pyongyang has also won a very significant strategic concession from Washington. For years North Korea insisted that it would not give up its nuclear ambitions until the United States discarded his “hostile” policy toward Pyongyang. After years of summarily rejecting Pyongyang’s claims, Washington in 2007 began to take concrete steps to convince North Korea that the US is phasing out its Cold War policy toward North Korea and is willing to eventually normalize bilateral diplomatic and commercial relations.

Pyongyang has given up very little to achieve these significant gains. It did shut down its nuclear facilities at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center and has allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to resume its monitoring there. But this is nothing new since Pyongyang had done this between 1994 and 2002.

The Bush Administration on the other hand, has had to completely discard its “Neo-con” strategy of not “rewarding” or “appeasing” Pyongyang for its past misconduct. At the same time, Washington has had to end its efforts to coerce Pyongyang into submission to its demands. No longer do we hear any mention of the “Proliferation Strategic Initiative” (PSI) designed by Washington’s “neo-cons” to use international economic pressure to convince Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs. Instead we now hear that the Bush Administration is preparing to remove North Korea from the so-called “terrorism list,” first imposed on North Korea in 1987, and phase out the Trading with the Enemy Act economic sanctions put on North Korea after its June 1950 assault on South Korea.

Currently Pyongyang appears focused on using the US conciliatory attitude to achieve another goal – compel Tokyo to moderate its hard line stance regarding the Japanese abduction issue. Thus far Hill has concentrated on achieving President Bush’s goal of “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of North Korea’s nuclear programs, a most admirable goal. Pyongyang on the other hand has steadily maneuvered Hill toward assisting it with fulfilling another goal – blunting Japan’s demands regarding resolution of the abduction issue while also sparking friction in the Washington-Tokyo relationship.

Thus far Pyongyang has achieved only partial success. It was won from Assistant Secretary Hill the US commitment to drop it from the terrorism list and to phase out economic sanctions. Hill’s handling of the situation has in fact caused friction between the two allies. But largely due to Japanese efforts, North Korea’s efforts have fallen short of their goals. First of all, the White House, at Tokyo’s behest, has restrained Hill and stiffened the US stance regarding the abduction issue. Also summit meetings between Abe and Bush in Washington at the end of April and again in Sydney in early September have minimize bilateral friction and demonstrated to Pyongyang that the US-Japan alliance remains firm.

As of early September, Japan's diplomatic efforts toward Washington and Pyongyang appear to have achieved concrete results. Washington is now much more sensitive to Tokyo's concerns about the abduction issue and Hill has had to link his drive to end North Korea's nuclear programs by year's end to the pace of Tokyo-Pyongyang reconciliation. Pyongyang meanwhile at the early September working group talks in Ulan Bator finally agreed to engage Tokyo in more frequent substantive talks about the abduction issue.

Undoubtedly Pyongyang has gained far more than it has given up thus far in 2007. Among its most important gains in 2007 is the consensus among most Six Party Talks participants that the United States and Japan must continue to respect the "simultaneous steps" process by exchanging with Pyongyang concessions of equivalent value if the talks' ultimate goal of a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear programs is to be achieved.

One could conclude that North Korea has successfully turned the situation completely around since the Six Party Talks began in 2003. At the beginning, it stood alone. Today, it has convinced Beijing, Moscow and Seoul that it is earnest in its promises to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions. This is not necessarily a bad situation for the United States and Japan. After all, progress has finally begun toward their avowed goal of achieving a peaceful negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear programs. In other words, the Six Party Talks, after more than three years, are finally moving toward success. At the same time, the talks are successfully minimizing the risk of another Korean War.

What happens next will depend greatly on whether Pyongyang will finally facilitate significant progress toward resolution of the Japanese abduction issue. If it does, Japan will be able to join the United States in adopting a more moderate attitude toward Pyongyang. But if Pyongyang refuses to adopt a cooperative attitude toward Tokyo, progress to end the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula will be stifled and tensions in the region could once again intensify. The only thing that can be said with any certainty is that resolution of Northeast Asia's problems remains a distant goal.

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones is currently Director of Global and Korean Studies at *Kokusai kyoyo daigaku* in Akita, Japan.