

Tokyo's Mini Six Party Gathering - Much to do About Nothing?

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The excitement in Tokyo was astonishing. The whispering began early in April among journalists. It hummed around Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington, D.C. Japanese diplomats then began shuttling back and forth between central Tokyo and distant Narita International Airport. The whispering became an excited chant, “The North Koreans are coming! The North Koreans are coming!” DPRK Deputy Director General of North American Affairs Chong Tae-yang arrived first with a couple of colleagues. A polished diplomat, Chong had extensive experience dealing with international humanitarian organizations during the late 1990s. After being promoted to his current position, Chong attended a couple of the Six Party Talks sessions in Beijing.

Even more exciting news soon followed. DPRK Vice Foreign Minister and chief delegate to the Six Party Talks Kim Gye Kwan arrived in Tokyo from Pyongyang. Almost as surprising was DPRK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Han Song-ryol's arrival. He is another regular participant in the Six Party Talks. Their arrivals combined with the presence of Japan's and South Korea's chief Six Party Talks delegates further inflamed speculation. Soon word spread that US Chief Six Party Talks negotiator Christopher Hill was en route to Tokyo. The speculation became a frenzy. Surely something very secret and extremely important was about to take place in Tokyo, or so many guessed.

Return to Reality

All the while, most journalists ignored the continuing exchange of verbal blasts between Washington and Tokyo, on the one hand, and Pyongyang on the other. They also forgot what had happened after the bilateral US-DPRK “briefing” in New York on March 7. But government officials in Washington and Pyongyang neither ignored nor forget anything. They know that US-DPRK ties must undergo radical repair before the Six Party Talks can resume.

It took three months of haggling between Washington and Pyongyang just to convene the March 7 bilateral “briefing” about newly imposed US Treasury Department Patriot Act Section 311 sanctions. These followed President Bush's early September 2005 affirmation of the Treasury Department's claim that “official North Korean entities” are responsible for the printing and distribution of counterfeit US currency and other illegal activities. At the briefing, Treasury Department Deputy Assistant Secretary Daniel Glaser, accompanied by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Kathleen Stephens, demanded that Pyongyang:

- officially accept responsibility for the printing and distribution of counterfeit US currency (so-called “super note \$100.00),

- promptly take concrete steps to halt these and other illegal activities, and punish the persons responsible, and
- dismissed Pyongyang contention that the new sanctions were designed to pressure North Korea into returning to the Six Party Talks.

Washington's United Front

Stephen's presence was primarily symbolic yet still very significant. She represented the Department of State (DoS) at the meeting to convey to her North Korean counterparts the visual image that a united front now exists within the Bush Administration between the National Security Council (NSC), the Department of Treasury (DoT) and DoS in charge of the deliberations. Her presence was designed to convince Pyongyang that the leading U.S. foreign policy agencies (NSC and DoS) fully support DoT's allegations of illegal activities by the North Korean government. Also, DoS fully concurs with the imposition of new U.S. sanctions on Pyongyang's international financial transactions.

Pyongyang's chief representative to the "briefing," North American Affairs Director General Li Gun first rejected any possibility that his government was directly responsible for the illegal activities, and then counter-proposed that the United States:

- convene working level discussions to consider steps to address US concerns, and
- allow North Korea to open a bank account in the United States.

Li was quoted in the *Washington Post* on March 9, 2006 as having said, "We cannot go into the six party talks with this hat (i.e. economic sanctions) over our head." The US promptly rejected Pyongyang's counter-proposal and insisted that North Korea's government is directly responsible for the counterfeiting, drug smuggling and other illegal activities. Washington reiterated its stance that the sanctions have nothing to do with the Six Party Talks.

Pre-emption Reiterated

The other shoe dropped on March 16 when the White House issued its revised version of, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America." This intensified Pyongyang's heartburn. According to the *Strategy* (p. 3),

People living in nations such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Iran, Syria, ... know firsthand the meaning of tyranny; ... All tyrannies threaten the world's interest in freedom's expansion, and some tyrannies, in their pursuit of WMD or sponsorship of terrorism, threaten our immediate security interests as well.

In other words, the Bush Administration reiterated its earlier depictions of North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil" and as an "out post of tyranny."

The *Strategy* continues on page 19, "The DPRK continues to destabilize its region and defy the international community, now boasting a small nuclear arsenal

and an illicit nuclear program in violation of its international obligations,” a point elaborated on page 21:

The North Korean regime also poses a serious nuclear proliferation challenge. It presents a long and bleak record of duplicity and bad-faith negotiations. In the past, the regime has attempted to split the United States from its allies. This time, the United States has successfully forged a consensus among key regional partners – China, Japan, Russia and the Republic of Korea – that the DPRK must give up all of its nuclear programs. Regional cooperation offers the best hope for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution of this problem. In a joint statement signed on September 19, 2005, in the Six Party Talks among these participants, the DPRK agreed to abandon its nuclear weapons and all existing nuclear programs. The joint statement also declared that the relevant parties would negotiate a permanent peace for the Korean Peninsula and explore ways to promote security cooperation in Asia. Along with our partners in the Six Party Talks, the United States will continue to press the DPRK to implement these commitments.

The United States has broader concerns regarding the DPRK as well. The DPRK counterfeits our currency, traffics in narcotics and engages in other illicit activities; threatens the ROK with its army and its neighbors with its missiles, and brutalizes and starves its people. The DPRK regime needs to change these policies, open up its political system, and afford freedom to its people. In the interim, we will continue to take all necessary measures to protect our national and economic security against the adverse effects of their bad conduct.

Rewriting History

The *Strategy's* characterization of the September 19, 2005 Six Party Talk's joint statement is, however, quite misleading. According to the statement, North Korea did agree, “to abandon its nuclear weapons ...” in accordance with the 1992 Joint South/North Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” But North Korea did not agree to forego “all existing nuclear programs.” On the contrary, in the declaration, “The DPRK stated that it has the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy.” Also according to the declaration, “The other parties expressed their respect and agreed to discuss, at an appropriate time, the subject of the provision of light water reactor to the DPRK.”

Having rewritten history, the *Strategy* reiterates the United States' sovereign right to take pre-emptive military action against its adversaries (page 23):

Taking action need not involve military force. Our strong preference and common practice is to address proliferation concerns through international diplomacy, in concert with key allies and regional partners. *If necessary, however, under long-standing principles of self defense, we do not rule the use of force before attacks occur, even if consequences of an attack with WMD are potentially so devastating, we cannot afford to stand idly by as grave dangers*

materialize. This is the principle and logic of preemption. The place of preemption in our national security strategy remains the same.

We will always proceed deliberately, weighing the consequences of our actions. The reasons for our actions will be clear, the force measured, and the cause just.

“Brigandish (sic) Balderdash”

Pyongyang’s reaction was prompt and predictable. Its Foreign Ministry Spokesman issued an authoritative policy statement on March 22, one week later. The spokesman warned that, “A preemptive attack is not the monopoly of the United States.” He accused the Bush Administration of harboring the intention “to start a war to prevent nuclear proliferation, combat terrorism and spread democracy.” The statement characterized the Bush Administration’s strategy “a brigandish (sic) document” filled with a “string of balderdash” and issued “to meet its narrow-minded partisan purpose.” The statement alleges that the Bush Administration is not really interested in pursuing the Six Party Talks and is trying to “evade the fulfillment” of commitments it made in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement. Pyongyang concluded with the warning, “It is our traditional fighting method to react to the increasing pressure head-on, without making any detour. The same method will be applied to countering the U.S. A preemptive attack is not the monopoly of the U.S.”

In spite of such pointed rhetoric, three days later on March 25, Korea Central News Agency, Pyongyang’s official news service, reiterated North Korea’s willingness to return to the Six Party Talks, but only after Washington had lifted its most recent sanctions. At the same time, the KCNA statement rejected Washington’s allegation that Pyongyang is officially and directly responsible for North Korea’s illegal activities.

Tougher Line

After pondering their options, Tokyo and Washington reacted the first week of April by further intensifying the collaboration under the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Launched in 2003 by John Bolton, current US Ambassador to the United Nations, PSI is a multilateral effort aimed at using existing international and domestic laws to halt international trade in all materials that might contribute to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. North Korea is not the sole focus of PSI, but remains one of its primary targets. On April 6, 2006, the U.S. Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control announced that, effective May 8, 2006, a new provision “prohibits United States persons from owning, leasing, operating or insuring any vessel flagged by North Korea.” The economic impact on North Korea is certain to be marginal, if any. Politically, however, this new stipulation adds further evidence for those in Pyongyang who claim that the United States is more interested in bringing about the Pyongyang regime’s economic demise than pursuing a peaceful diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue.

Not surprisingly, two days prior to Washington’s announcement, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) announced the addition of twenty North Korean companies and research institutions to Japan’s export control list. The aim is to prevent Japanese firms from inadvertently providing North Korea materials

that could further enhance its Weapons of Mass Destruction arsenal. The North Korean entities include trading, chemical and cement companies, Kim Chaek University of Technology, Pyongyang Maternity Hospital and Tanchon Commercial Bank. Previously, trade with Pyongyang's central Choson Bank had been band. Japanese companies are now banned from dealing with a total of 58 North Korean institutions and firms.

Against this back drop of heated rhetoric and intensified economic sanctions, diplomats representing the participating nations in the Six Party Talks began gathering in Tokyo the week of April 5. In light of the developments reviewed above, the absence of progress at the Tokyo gathering should not come as a surprise. Similarly, any expectation that a break through could be accomplished at the April 20, 2006 summit in Washington between President Bush and Chinese leader Hu Jin Dao would be pure speculation.

Demise of the Moderates

The Six Party Talks are on the verge of falling into the recycling bin of history just as happened to the Four Party Talks of the Clinton Administration. The primary cause is the Bush Administration's rejection of the September 2005 Joint Statement. Washington's hardliners are convinced that their "moderate counterparts" at the Department of State committed a bureaucratic "end run" on them to win President Bush's approval of the statement. Specifically, two members of the US delegation to the talks, NSC Victor Cha and his Defense Department counterpart Assistant Secretary Lawless opposed US approval of the statement. Their State Department colleagues, however, by passed them by asking Japan's delegation to recruit Japan's Foreign Minister to convince Secretary of State Rice to approve the statement when they met at the United Nations. The effort paid prompt dividends. Rice convinced President Bush that the statement was quite acceptable.

No sooner had Chief U.S. delegate Christopher Hill returned to Washington, D.C., however, that he encountered sustained and pointed criticism from the NSC, DoD and within the State Department, particularly from his nemesis and superior Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs Robert Joseph, the person who had assumed John Bolton's position once Bolton was dispatched to the United Nations. By mid-October, Bush Administration hardliners had regained control of policy toward North Korea. Hill's effort to visit Pyongyang, with strong support from Seoul, provided futile. Next Hill's ability to speak publicly was severely curtailed. By December, the Bush Administration had tamed the so-called moderates in the State Department. Ambassador DeTrani, the State Department official with the most experience dealing with North Korea, resigned his post as chief U.S. coordinator with North Korea and returned to the intelligence community. Office of Korea Affairs Director James Foster stepped up to assume DeTrani's responsibilities. By the end of January, however, he made known his decision to retire from the Foreign Service by the summer of 2006 and began actively looking for a job outside the U.S. government.

Toward Confrontation?

- The resurgence of Washington's "hard liners" has fostered:
 - an escalation of tension between the U.S. and North Korea,

- eliminated moderation in Washington and Pyongyang,
- convinced Pyongyang to retain its “nuclear deterrence capability,” and
- intensified efforts by Beijing and Seoul to stabilize the situation

Beijing and Seoul, with Tokyo’s active collaboration, had hoped to defuse the mounting tension with the Tokyo gathering. The effort obviously fell short of its intended goal. The two adversaries, Pyongyang and Washington, ignored their colleagues efforts and stuck rigidly to their positions. If anything, the adversaries appear to have tried to manipulate the gathering to their own advantage. North Korea’s chief delegate Kim Gye Kwan projected the image of a reasonable and friendly fellow. He appeared frequently before the multitude of milling media with a broad, friendly smile and harmless wave. He hardly seemed capable of representing the ruthless nuclear armed villain that Washington has tried to portray his country. Meanwhile the chief U.S. delegate Chris Hill, once noted for his warm friendly smile and willingness to chat with journalists, appeared resolutely stern and reluctant to say more than a few words.

Having captured the attention of the international press in Tokyo, Pyongyang’s government seized the opportunity to rattle its sabers. Just before departing Tokyo, DPRK Vice Minsiter Kim Gye Kwan declared, according to the April 13, 2006 editor of the *Washington Post*, “There is nothing wrong with delaying the resumption of the six party talks. In the meantime, we can make more (strong) our deterrent (capability). If the United States does not like that, they should create an atmosphere conducive to returning to the talks.” Later that same day, Assistant Secretary Hill told journalists, also according to the same issue of the *Washington Post*, “The DPRK needs to understand that as long as it is going to be producing nuclear weapons, we (the USA) are are going to be having a real close look at its finances.”

Pyongyang promptly let it be known that it would not conform to Washington’s demands. It escalated the rhetoric considerably when its number two man, Kim Yong Nam, President of the Supreme People’s Assembly Presidium and closest civilian adviser to Supreme Commander Kim Jong Il, confirmed and elaborated on Kim Gye Kwan’s comments at the “National Meeting held to commemorate Kim Il Sung’s birthday.” According to the official Korea Central News Agency report (www.kcna.co.jp), Kim said,

The U.S. is going reckless in its moves to bring down the DPRK at any cost, leaving no means and methods untried, including military attack, economic blockade and destabilization in persistent pursuance (sic) of its vicious hostile policy toward the DPRK quite contrary to the spirit agreed upon at the six-party talks for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (reference to the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement). It is the legitimate right of the DPRK to self-defence to bolster up (sic) its military deterrent (capability) in every way to cope with the prevailing grave situation.

Such rhetoric is certainly on conducive to fostering diplomatic dialogue and the forging of a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue. On the contrary, the recent and continuing escalation of rhetoric and tension between Pyongyang and Washington is indeed quite worrisome for all concerned parties. Beijing has again

intensified its diplomatic efforts to induce flexibility on both sides. Meanwhile Seoul continues to urge both sides to find a face saving way out of their current verbal confrontation.

North Korea's Kim Gye Kwan, according to the April 14 issue of *The Asahi Shimbun* (English edition), reportedly told journalists in Tokyo, "Our (North Korea's) demand is to get the funds that are frozen in the Macao bank back into our hands. The moment we retrieve the funds, we will return (to the six party talks)." This suggests that Pyongyang has reduced its preconditions for going back to the talks. Instead of demanding, as Pyongyang has repeatedly done since December 2005, that the U.S. lift its new Patriot Act related sanctions, North Korea now only demands that the funds frozen at a single bank be released.

If Kim's comment's accurately reflect his government's current position regarding return to the Six Party Talks, it would now appear that the diplomatic ball is in Washington's court. If Washington demonstrates a willingness to let Pyongyang "save its face," the Six Party Talks could soon resume. Otherwise, the rhetoric and tensions will continue to escalate.