

Success in Beijing – Beginning or the End?

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For the
Dong-a Ilbo
August 29, 2003

The first round of the Six Party Talks in Beijing was moderately successful. This should not surprise anyone. The impasse between North Korea and the United States continues, and a “peaceful, diplomatic solution” is not imminent. But these are the long term goals. The participants’ expectations define success. This time, they wisely restrained their expectations. Success for Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow continuing the meeting for three days without major disruption or premature rupture.

China is to be commended for its adroit diplomacy. Gathering the six nations in Beijing required impressive diplomatic energy. This is indicative of the complexity of the issues awaiting resolution on the Korean Peninsula. Round one for the time being arrested the escalation of tensions between Washington and Pyongyang. Also, these two antagonists halted their verbal abuse of one another long enough to meet face to face and to engage in informal but cordial dialogue.

The delegations are to be commended for remaining calm, despite efforts by hard liners in Pyongyang and Washington to undercut the generally productive atmosphere. Predictably, North Korea repeated it’s intention, first enunciated at last April trilateral talks in Beijing, to “declare it self a nuclear power” and to demonstrate that it has a nuclear capability.

Generally overlooked in press reports was the important fact that North Korea stated this as a negotiating position. Pyongyang’s delegation also tied its nuclear claim to the U.S. refusal to provide security guarantees. Its chief delegate reportedly explained that his government was willing to negotiate a trade with the U.S. If the US provided formal security guarantees, North Korea would dismantle its nuclear program. Such an exchange, Pyongyang emphasized, must be conducted on a simultaneous basis.

This is actually a positive development. It indicates that Pyongyang is still willing to negotiate an end to its nuclear program. But in Washington, an unidentified Bush Administration official attempted to disrupt the constructive atmosphere in Beijing. He suggested to the US mass media that North Korea had renewed its threats of “nuclear black mail.” Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, and diplomats at the Six Party Talks remained focused on pursuing a peaceful diplomatic solution

These are relatively small steps. Nevertheless, they are very important because they are constructive. These were the first constructive ones that the United States and North Korea have taken since their impasse began almost one year ago. In this regard, they are the first steps away from confrontation and toward the participants' shared goal of a peaceful diplomatic solution.

The Chairman's statement holds out the promise that the concerned governments will endeavor to convert the Six Party Talks into a continuing diplomatic process. They also committed themselves, including North Korea, to peacefully achieving a nuclear free Korean Peninsula. This will require the replacement of the intense mutual distrust and hostility that now plagues US-North Korea relations with mutual respect and trust. Also, it will be necessary to erase the reasons for North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Ultimately, this means the signing of a peace treaty to replace the Korean War Armistice. Obviously, achieving these goals will be very challenging. Thus we must continue to restrain our expectations. Otherwise, impatience and frustration could undermine the Six Party effort.

Hopefully, the first round of the Six Party Talks was just the beginning, not the end.

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