

## **The Six Party Talks – Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?**

**By**

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**November 2005**

Observers of the Six Party Talks are certain to debate whether the most recent gathering of diplomats in Beijing on November 8 – 11, 2005, left “the glass half full or half empty.” Some observers have already declared that the meeting achieved nothing. It seems to others, including myself, however, say that the opposite is true. The meeting left the glass “half full.” That is good news. But how can achieving “nothing” be good news? Obviously such an optimistic view demands explanation.

Let us begin with the most obvious results. The six nations met in “early November,” just as they had previously promised in their September 19, 2005, Joint Statement. According to the “Chairman’s Statement” drafted by the Chinese host at the talk’s conclusion, all the parties “conducted serious, pragmatic and constructive discussions.” The diplomats also “reaffirmed that they would fully implement the Joint Statement ...” and pledged to engage in “confidence building” to “comprehensively implement the Joint Statement.” Finally, the participants promised to continue the Six Party Process. So far, this is all good news.

But there is more good news. Also according to the Chairman’s Statement, all the parties “reaffirmed that they would fully implement the Joint Statement in line with the principle of ‘commitment for commitment, action for action.’” North Korea first proposed these key phrases over one year ago. Now, all the parties, most importantly including the United States, have reaffirmed their concurrence with North Korea’s proposal. At the same time, according to the Chairman’s Statement, all the parties, most importantly the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, confirmed their commitment to achieving a “verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Without Washington and Pyongyang’s affirmations of their critical compromises, the Six Party Talks would have ended.

The good news continues. At the end of the talks, DPRK chief negotiator Kim Kye Gwan made remarks to journalists just before he departed for Pyongyang. Once Kim had returned home, the DPRK’s authoritative Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) confirmed his remarks as representing his government’s official policy. Most notable about Kim’s statement is that he did not mention the DPRK’s demand that the United States provide it a light water reactor (LWR) as compensation for Pyongyang’s agreement to end and verifiably dismantle its nuclear weapons programs. Equally

important is the fact that Kim did not mention the LWR demand during the three day meeting.

Instead, Kim reiterated Pyongyang's offer to "freeze" nuclear activities at its Yongyang Nuclear Research Center. The representatives from Washington and Pyongyang promptly rejected this proposal. Kim Kye Gwan, however, did not press the "freeze" proposal either during the remainder of the brief round of talks nor in his concluding remarks. Instead, he accented the positive. Kim recalled that he had "put forward several proposals to implement the joint statement ..." but then emphasized, "Most important among them is to implement the joint statement through simultaneous actions on the principle of "action for action."

Next, Kim, clearly with his government's full support, shifted the focus away from the LWR issue to the recent US activation of economic sanctions against selected DPRK companies. Predictably, Kim and his government pointed to the sanctions as evidence of the US "hostile policy toward the DPRK" and as being contrary to the Joint Statement. But once again, some what surprisingly, both Pyongyang and Washington stepped away from confrontation. Instead, according to Kim, "The DPRK and the U.S. sides agreed to open talks and to discuss and settle the issue of financial sanctions in the future."

Clearly this is a much more constructive proposal than has previously been both Pyongyang's and Washington's practice. Instead of escalating their rhetoric, they promised to use "diplomatic dialogue" to resolve differences regarding economic sanctions. At the same time, Washington's willingness to engage Pyongyang in diplomatic dialogue regarding an issue that has plagued the bilateral relationship for more than a half century indicates President Bush's intention to keep open the "window of opportunity" for diplomacy despite growing impatience in some quarters of his administration with the Six Party Talks process. Finally, the promise of further bilateral US-DPRK dialogue tends to confirm the claim in the Chinese chairman's statement that the just concluded talks had been "pragmatic and constructive," and had reaffirmed all parties' willingness to engage in "confidence building."

Yet a great deal remains unresolved. So far, the Six Party Talks have achieved many "commitments for commitments," but little "action for action." Most worrisome is North Korea's continuing extraction of weapons grade plutonium and possible continuing development of an uranium program. On the other hand, North Korea's continuation of its voluntary moratorium on the launching of ballistic missiles is reassuring. North Korea's claim of having a "nuclear deterrence capability" will remain mostly psychological until it acquires the means to attack another nation with nuclear weapons. Fortunately for all the concerned nations, Japan has initiated talks with North Korea aimed at eliminating Pyongyang's long range ballistic missile capability.

Despite the slow pace of progress toward the ultimate goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, recent developments at the Six Party Talks continue to be reassuring. Given the potential cost of confrontation, patient persistence is preferable for all the concerned parties.