

The Six Party Talks – Going in Circles

By

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The Six Party Talks continue to go in circles. Nearly three years have passed since Chinese diplomats joined diplomats from Moscow, Pyongyang, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington in Beijing to begin the Six Party Talks. All the participants quickly agreed to forge a diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions.

Today, however, we are no closer to a peaceful resolution than we were three years ago. The talks have not been futile. Diplomacy was preserved peace in the region. Reinforcing this common preference for a peaceful diplomatic solution is another shared goal – perpetuate the region's prosperity and economic dynamism by avoiding war.

But bickering between the United States and North Korea has repeatedly disrupted progress toward a solution. Another cycle of bickering began just after the six nations issued their first joint statement in September 2005. The statement's purpose was to outline the path to diplomatically end North Korea's nuclear programs. Within a matter of days, however, the bickering resumed. Pyongyang demanded that the United States provide it a modern nuclear light water reactor (LWR) as part of the price for its acceptance of Washington's demand that North Korea "completely, verifiably, irreversibly dismantle" (CVID) all of its nuclear program. Pyongyang promptly rejected this.

The two sides then began squabbling about other relatively minor issues. In October 2005, the issue was chief US negotiator Christopher Hill's visit to Pyongyang. Pyongyang accepted two of three US conditions. It said that Hill could travel directly from Seoul to Pyongyang and that US Coordinator for North Korea Human Rights Ambassador Jeffery Lofkowitz could accompany Hill. But Pyongyang rejected Washington's demand that North Korea shut down its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. Hill apparently had hoped to discuss the opening of a U.S. diplomatic liaison office in Pyongyang if North Korea agreed to "freeze" the operation of its nuclear reactor.

Then the U.S. imposed new economic sanctions. North Korea for many years has been the source of counterfeit U.S. currency (so-called "super notes") and other international contraband. In June 2006, President Bush authorized the U.S. Department of Treasury to investigate North Korea's ties to such illegal activities. In September, just before the Six

Party Talks produced the September Statement, Bush implemented the Patriot Act's Section 311. This "froze" all U.S. dollars in a Chinese-operated bank in Macau that has long handled many of North Korea's international financial transactions. Pyongyang promptly alleged that the sanctions were designed to pressure it into giving up its demands for a light water reactor.

In November, relations between Hill and his North Korean counterpart Kim Gye Kwan deteriorated. Kim claimed Hill had invited him and a North Korean delegation to New York to "negotiate" the economic sanctions issue. Hill denied this. He insisted that he had only invited Pyongyang to send a "working level" delegation to listen to U.S. police authorities explain their evidence that North Korea distributed counterfeit U.S. currency. Pyongyang in early December rejected Washington's invitation and said it would not return to the Six Party Talks until the Section 311 sanctions were lifted.

Efforts by all the concerned parties, particularly Seoul, to end the impasse have failed. Ambassador Hill even traveled to Beijing in January hoping to meet with his North Korean counterpart to resolve their differences. China arranged for the two diplomats to meet briefly in Beijing but the impasse persisted.

Apparently Kim Gye-gwan told Hill in Beijing that the Pyongyang government was not responsible for the circulation of counterfeit US currency, but Kim admitted that some "private" North Korean citizens were engaged in such activity. Kim also reportedly told Hill that if Washington would share with Pyongyang any evidence about these illegal activities, Pyongyang would investigate and take appropriate action. As always, however, Pyongyang wanted something in return. It wants the United States to recognize Pyongyang's "sovereign right" to investigate and punish its citizens. More difficult for Washington to accept, however, is Pyongyang's insistence that the US agree to first lift the Section 311 sanctions. Only then would North Korea return to the Six Party Talks.

Nothing happened until February 6. That day the so-called "New York Channel" was reopened. This is the only official diplomatic channel between Washington and Pyongyang. When the two capitals wish to exchange diplomatic documents or dialogue, then rely on the Office of Korea Affairs at the U.S. State Department and the DPRK Mission to the United Nations. The channel was closed to punish North Korea for refusing to return to the Six Party Talks. During the week of February 6, both sides exchanged several messages in the hope of formulating a "mutually acceptable face saving solution" to their current differences.

On February 9, North Korea's foreign ministry issued a statement that denied any "official responsibility" for the production and distribution of counterfeit US currency. The statement also officially confirmed that Pyongyang respects Washington's right to protect its currency. But Pyongyang also reiterated that it would not return to the Six Party Talks until the Section 311 sanctions were lifted. Prospects for the Six Party Talks' resumption immediately diminished.

Efforts to break the impasse suffered another blow during U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow February 14 interview with South Korea's Ohmy TV (see: "U.S. Hopes for North Korean Reform" at: <http://english.ohmynews.com>). The Ambassador reportedly said, "We {the U.S. government} are convinced that the counterfeiting and other activities are being organized by [North Korean] official companies and other official entities in North Korea, ... In other words, the ambassador rejected North Korea's official claim that the government in Pyongyang had nothing to do with such "illegal activities." This comment is certain to anger Pyongyang's hardliners and further North Korea's return to the Six Party Talks.

The current impediments to the Six Party Talks' resumption have nothing to do with the tough issues of nuclear weapons and reactors. The problems are rooted in the more than half century of mutual mistrust and hostility between Washington and Pyongyang. The best we can expect now is that both governments, under pressure from their Beijing and Seoul allies, will continue to seek ways to end the current bickering. Eventually, the Six Party Talks appeared destined to resume, possibly as early as March. But then the two sides will have to confront much more contentious issues.