

The Six Party Talks' Resumption and the Importance of Credibility

By

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Finally, after four frustrating months, the path has been cleared for the resumption of the Six Party Talks' process and further implementation of the February 13 accord.

For Pyongyang, the \$25 million dollars it has just received is insignificant. More important is the Bush Administration's demonstration through its actions that it has in word and deed shifted its tactics toward North Korea. Equally important to Pyongyang is Chief US negotiator Christopher Hill's demonstration that he can fulfill the promises he makes to his North Korean counterpart Kim Kye-gwan.

President Bush's signing of a waiver that allowed the electronic transfer of frozen North Korean funds from the Banco Delta Alpha (BDA) through the US banking system to a Russian bank confirms to Pyongyang that Washington is now committed to pursuing in concrete action the "step by step" process outlined in the February 2007 Six Party Accord. Such a process was first agreed to between Washington and Pyongyang at talks in February 1994, more than one decade ago. Pyongyang has been pressing for the resumption of such a process since the Six Party Talks commenced in 2003.

Pyongyang's commitment to the "step by step, action for action" process is rooted in its deep distrust of the United States. It believes the best way to erase this distrust is for each side to take steps of equal value. Unfortunately, US Chief Negotiator Christopher Hill's early efforts to win Pyongyang's cooperation were misguided. He made promises in October 2005 that he could not fulfill because of a lack of support in Washington, D.C. For example, he promised his North Korean counterpart Kim Kye-gwan that he would visit Pyongyang to discuss the new financial sanctions that the US Treasury Department had just imposed on North Korean funds at BDA. But Washington quickly denied him permission to make the visit. Hill then promised to invite Kim to New York to discuss the sanctions. Again Washington refused to support Hill and visas were denied to Kim and his delegation.

It was not until early 2007 that Bush's shift in tactics also gained Hill the support in Washington he needed to keep his promises to Kim Kye-gwan. First the two delegates met in Berlin, but Kim insisted that Hill invite Kim to the USA. Hill successfully did so at the end of January. This opened the way for the February 13 accord. But powerful skeptics in Pyongyang demanded that Hill provide further

proof that President Bush would support Hill's pledge not just to get the funds unfrozen, but also to have the US government transfer the funds.

Pyongyang's insistence caused disagreement in Washington. The Treasury Department claimed it had fulfilled the US promise to unfreeze the funds. But since October 2005, Pyongyang has insisted that the US not just unfreeze the funds but transfer them to a bank account in the United States. Hill had indicated that this would be possible and Pyongyang insisted that he fulfill his promise.

After four months of indecisiveness, President Bush finally decided to back the State Department and Hill rather than the Treasury Department by signing a waiver that allowed the US government both to unfreeze and to transfer electronically the North Korean funds.

Hill's success augers well for the Six Party Talks' future. It is certain to quiet Pyongyang's critics of Hill. No longer can they dismiss him as insincere and without influence in the White House. Also, it will very likely reduce Pyongyang's micro-management of Kim Kye-gwan and his negotiations with Hill. The same can be said of the Bush Administration. Increased flexibility on both sides will enable each to exchange proposals and to better explore what the other side wants and what is politically realistic for it to accept. In other words, real negotiation between the Washington-Pyongyang can finally begin. This should quicken the pace of progress in the Six Party Talks. To sustain this progress, however, it is imperative that the two sides sustain the "step by step" process.

Now that Hill has done as he promised, Pyongyang must fulfill its pledges. Already it has invited the IAEA to Pyongyang to determine what is meant by the February 13 accord's provision that North Korea facilitate "all necessary monitoring and verification as agreed between the IAEA and the DPRK." Undoubtedly, the IAEA will attempt to maximize its monitoring while Pyongyang will try to minimize it. At this point in the implementation process, however, Kim Kye-gwan is now under pressure to match Hill's demonstration of credibility. If Kim fails, the accord will collapse, but this is not likely. Already Hill has previewed for Pyongyang Washington's eventual willingness to give it what it really wants – the normalization of bilateral US-DPRK relations.

Nevertheless, the most certain and constant aspect of this entire Six Party Talks' process has been and continues to be that eventual success in the dismantlement of all of North Korea's nuclear programs will take time, patience, endurance, intense diplomacy and increasingly significant inducements.

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