

The Six Party Talks – Suspended Until Further Notice

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Finally the United States and North Korea have reached an agreement regarding the Six Party Talks. Unfortunately, the agreement does not improve prospects for a diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear program. On the contrary, the situation in Northeast Asia could become increasingly tense. Washington and Pyongyang have essentially decided not to return to the Six Party Talks, at least not in the near future. This became very apparent during the recently concluded "track II" gathering in Tokyo. North Korea's high powered delegation met with everyone except the United States delegation.

Washington continues its dual stance. It claims that there is no connection between North Korea's demands at the Six Party Talks and the new economic sanctions that Washington imposed on North Korea in September 2005. Actually, however, there is a direct link.

Pyongyang claims that it will give up its nuclear weapon's program, but wishes to continue its "peaceful" nuclear energy program. It has repeatedly avowed its willingness to return to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), rejoin the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and allow inspections of its nuclear facilities. In exchange, it wants the United States to normalize diplomatic and economic relations, drop all sanctions against it and provide North Korea a light water nuclear reactor (LWR).

Washington has answered, "No deal!" Instead it demands that North Korea give up all nuclear programs. At the same time, the United States imposed new economic sanctions on North Korea citing its continuing involvement in "the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." Also the United States asserts that the Pyongyang government is responsible for North Korea's involvement in numerous illegal activities such as the printing and distribution of counterfeit U.S. currency and drugs. These new sanctions have effectively disrupted North Korea's international banking transactions and are impeding its trade with other nations.

Pyongyang's diplomats at an early March 2006 meeting in New York with U.S. Treasury Department officials offered a "mutually face saving" solution. Pyongyang officially recognized the United States' right to "protect" its currency. But at the same time, Pyongyang rejected Washington's allegation that the North Korean government is behind all the illegal activities. Instead, Pyongyang offered to engage in "working level" discussions to jointly develop measures to end the illegal activities.

Again Washington said, “No deal!” It counter demanded that Pyongyang:

- publicly admit responsibility for the illegal activities,
- immediately take steps to investigate and punish the responsible parties,
- promptly agree to return to the Six Party Talks.

Pyongyang’s reaction was quite predictable. It reaffirmed its determination not to return to the Six Party Talks until the United States had dropped all of its new sanctions.

The Bush Administration waited until the end of March before taking further action. It had hoped that Pyongyang would soften its stance after the New York meeting. Once again, however, the Bush Administration underestimated Pyongyang’s resolve. IF anything, Pyongyang has stiffened its determination not to return to the Six Party Talks until Washington demonstrates some flexibility.

A well placed official in the Bush Administration told me at the end of March that the White House had decided returning to the Six Party Talks would be futile. Finally, the Bush Administration has a consensus regarding how to deal with North Korea. All the key policy makers agree that it would be useless to continue efforts to negotiate an end to North Korea’s nuclear programs. In other words, Secretary Rice now agrees with Vice President Chaney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Council chief Hadley. Their new consensus shifts the emphasis from diplomacy at the Six Party Talks to intensification of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) using economic pressure. At the same time, President Bush continues to hold open the possibility of using “other options,” a position he confirmed with his recent affirmation of his “pre-emptive counter-proliferation” strategy.

Washington’s new consensus appears to have merely convinced Pyongyang’s “hardliners” that it must keep its “nuclear deterrence capability” to defend against Bush’s “pre-emptive” strategy.

In short, Washington and Pyongyang have convinced one another no to return to the Six Party Talks. In Washington’s eyes, if Pyongyang will not halt its illegal activities and respect international law, then it cannot be trusted to fulfill the terms of a diplomatic agreement forged at the Six Party Talks. This is the link between Washington’s economic sanctions and the talks. Pyongyang, on the other hand, is similarly convinced that it must have a nuclear weapons capability to protect itself against Washington’s hostile policies, i.e. PSI and President Bush’s pre-emptive military option.

Seoul and Beijing can be expected to intensify their diplomatic efforts to restart the Six Party Talks. Meanwhile, Tokyo and Moscow wait on the sidelines hoping for the best and uncertain about how they might improve the situation. The fact remains, however, that at the present time, hardliners dominate policy in Washington and Pyongyang. Until “moderates” reassert their influence, the Six Party Talks are destined to become historical memories like the Four Party Talks of the Clinton Administration. Meanwhile, the longer it takes to restart diplomacy, the greater will be the escalation of tension in Northeast Asia regarding possible instability on the Korean Peninsula.