

The Six Party Talks – Resumption Inevitable?

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Prospects for resumption of the long stalled Six Party Talks appear to be improving. February or March, 2005 is a realistic time frame for China, the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and the United States to return to Beijing for round four of the talks initiated in the summer of 2003 to forge a diplomatic resolution of the Korean Peninsula's nuclear problem. But before it will return to the talks, Pyongyang insists that President Bush personally make clear that future US policy will be less hostile toward North Korea. President Bush's response to this expectation could prove decisive in determining whether and when the Six Party Talks might resume.

Early on, all the participants, including North Korea, agreed that the Six Party Talks would be the best way to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. Yet a continuing diplomatic boxing match between Washington and Pyongyang has stalled the talks since July, 2004. Pyongyang asserts that it will not return to the talks until Washington drops its "hostile policy." The Bush Administration adamantly rejects North Korea's allegation. A reconvening of the talks in the near future would seem to contradict the fact that neither the U.S. nor North Korea has fundamentally altered their respective positions. Obviously an explanation is in order for any optimistic projection.

A Change of Atmosphere

International developments since the talks' third round ended last June have significantly affected the policy priorities of the United States and North Korea. A key factor has been the US preoccupation with Iraq and Pyongyang concentration on the revitalization of its economy. Chinese, South Korean, Japanese and Russian patient and persistent diplomatic efforts have moderated the stances of President Bush and his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong Il. Additionally, North Korea's clumsy efforts to resolve the abduction issue with Japan have angered the Japanese people and embarrassed its primary supporter China. Consequently, North Korea since mid-December 2004 finds itself where it stood when the Six Party Talks commenced – on the diplomatic defensive.

Since last spring, Pyongyang has reiterated that it agrees in principle to phase out its nuclear weapons development program and to allow the resumption of international inspections of its nuclear facilities. In exchange, it has called for the phasing out of its military related program in a way that would match "words for words" and "action for action." This "freeze for rewards" process could commence, Pyongyang insists, only after Washington has dropped its alleged "hostile policy." North Korea also rejects US demands that North Korea accept, without bilateral negotiations or US concessions, the "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) of both its military and civilian nuclear programs.

Additionally, Pyongyang has, and continues to demand that the Bush Administration negotiate with it a series of steps that would culminate in the normalization of relations. North Korea wants included in this process:

- Convening of direct bilateral negotiations between the US and North Korea,
- Affirmation of respect for North Korea's sovereignty
- Security assurances that the United States would not invade or attack North Korea,
- An end of all economic sanctions and its removal from the US list of terrorist nations,
- Replacement of the Korean War armistice with a peace treaty,
- Resumption of heavy fuel oil deliveries,
- The continued development of its civilian nuclear power capability,
- Acceptance of North Korea's claim that it does not have a program to make highly enriched uranium (HEU).

Strategic Firmness, Tactical Flexibility

As of the inauguration of President Bush's second term on January 20, 2005, his administration continues to adamantly reject North Korea's proposal and to maintain its strategy of the pre-emptive countering of any weapons of mass destruction threat to the United States. Beginning last summer, however, the White House sanctioned "strategic firmness and tactical flexibility" in an effort to project a less assertive posture.

U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration director Linton Brooks in formal remarks on June 21, 2004 at the Carnegie International Non-proliferation Conference affirmed the Bush Administration's pre-emptive counter-proliferation strategy, but tried to minimize this as a threat to nations on President Bush's "axis of evil," list, i.e. Iraq, North Korea, Iran and Libya. Linton said, "The (Bush) Administration's national security strategy reaffirmed that in rare circumstances, the United States would not necessarily wait to be attacked with weapons of mass destruction before it could respond to real threats." He also confirmed that, "We (the Bush Administration) asked (Congress) for very modest funding for some advanced concepts work and for the nuclear earth penetrator (the so-called 'robust nuclear earth penetrator') study." Pyongyang sees the US development of "nuclear earth penetrator" weapons as being aimed at rendering useless North Korea's extensive reliance on underground facilities to protect its military capability from air bombardment. Linton's remarks seemed to confirm Pyongyang's conviction that the Bush Administration had no intention of altering its "hostile policy" toward it.¹

Within the context of "strategic firmness and tactical flexibility," the first working group talks for the Six Party Talks convened in Beijing on June 21-22, followed by the third round of plenary sessions on June 23-26. At this third round, Washington sought to soften its stance toward North Korea by packaging its counterproposal to North Korea in polite language. The US delegation was even allowed to engage their North Korean counterparts in the first lengthy and substantive bilateral dialogue since the Six Party Talks commenced a year earlier. The Bush Administration, however, continued to rule out giving North Korea any concessions or engaging in bilateral negotiations.

Washington also sought to assuage its allies concerns about its apparent rigidity toward North Korea by confirming that the United States would condone South Korea and Japan providing North Korea some economic benefits prior to acceptance of “CVID.”

Old Wine in a New Bottle?

Two weeks later, on July 15, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly, the chief US negotiator at the Six Party Talks, publicly unveiled the Administration’s proposal before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He reported that the United States had developed, in “close coordination” with South Korea and Japan, a new proposal for North Korea to consider. Presented to North Korea in two and one half hours of discussion with Pyongyang’s delegation at the Six Party Talks, the proposal called for: ²

- The DPRK would, as a first step, commit to dismantle all of its nuclear programs.
- The parties would then reach agreement on a detailed implementation plan requiring, at a minimum, the supervised disabling, dismantlement and elimination of all nuclear-related facilities and materials; the removal of all nuclear weapons and weapons components, centrifuge and other nuclear parts, fissile material and fuel rods; and a long-term monitoring program.
- We ((USA, ROK and Japan) envisage a short initial preparatory period, of perhaps three months’ duration, to prepare for the dismantlement and removal of the DPRK’s nuclear programs. During this period, the DPRK would:
 - Provide a complete listing of all its nuclear activities, and cease operations of all of its nuclear activities;
 - Permit the publicly disclosed and observable disablement of all nuclear weapons/weapons components and key centrifuge parts.
 - These actions by the DPRK would be monitored subject to international verification.
- Under this proposal, as the DPRK carried out its commitments, the other parties (South Korea and Japan) would take some corresponding steps. These would be provisional or temporary in nature and would only yield hasting benefits to the DPRK after the dismantlement of its nuclear programs had been completed. The steps would include:
 - Upon agreement of the overall approach, including a DPRK agreement to dismantle all nuclear programs in a permanent, thorough and transparent manner subject to effective verification, non-U.S. parties would provide heavy fuel oil to the DPRK.
 - Upon acceptance of the DPRK declaration, the parties would: provide provisional multilateral security assurances, which would become more enduring as the process proceeded,
 - Begin a study to determine the energy requirements of the DPRK and how to meet them by non-nuclear energy programs,
 - Begin a discussion of steps necessary to lift remaining economic sanctions on the DPRK and on the steps necessary for removal of the DPRK from the Lists of State Sponsors of Terrorism.

“US Day Dreaming”

North Korea’s initial politely cautious reaction sparked some premature optimism in Washington and Seoul that Pyongyang might accept the proposal . The visit to Washington, D.C. on July 21 of the DPRK’s representatives to UN reinforced this optimism. The day after the visit, however, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed on July 22 the North Korea Human Rights Act. The act’s initial version contained language that North Korea considered “hostile” and designed to topple the Kim Jong Il government.

Pyongyang’s policy makers quickly concluded that the Bush Administration had no intention of moderating its perceived “hostile policy” toward North Korea. The DPRK Foreign Ministry’s spokesman made this clear on July 24, 2004. He called the US June proposal “nonsense,” “a sham,” and “little worthy to be discussed any longer.” He concluded that, “It is a daydream for the U.S. to contemplate forcing the DPRK to lay down arms first under the situation where both are in a state of armistice and at war technically.” The DPRK spokesman also reiterated the general outline of North Korea’s earlier proposal to end the nuclear impasse. ³

Rigidity Restored

Pyongyang’s response intensified the dueling in Washington between so-called “moderates,” led by Secretary of State Colin Powell, and “hardliners” quietly led by Vice President Chaney and publicly represented by Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs John Bolton. The “hardliners” maintained the upper hand. They urged a ratcheting up of pressure on North Korea. Except for a single, one day inconsequential visit to Washington in July, North Korean diplomats were denied permission to visit the US capital. US diplomats were barred from discussing substantive matters, particularly the nuclear issue, with their North Korean counterparts vis a vis the so-called “New York channel” between the State Department and North Korea’s Mission to the United Nations in New York.

In October, the United States moved to demonstrate its resolve to halt nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia by means other than diplomacy, if this proved necessary. First it conducted a multilateral Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) operation. Hosted by Japan and supported by Australia, this military exercise was designed to demonstrate to North Korea the multilateral capability of the United States and its allies to halt any North Korean export of nuclear weapons related materials. Then in mid-October, a U.S. diplomat met a visiting DPRK delegation in New York to assert that the U.S. would not resume food aid to North Korea until further notice.

The Iraq Factor

Washington’s increasing preoccupation with the insurgency in Iraq limited the Bush Administration’s options for dealing with North Korea. The concentration of US forces in the Middle East definitely impeded any consideration by the Bush Administration of

threatening the use of military forces against North Korea. Pyongyang appears to have sensed this involuntary restraint on the Bush Administration. It worked to project itself to the other participants in the Six Party Talks as striving to comply with their goal of sustaining a nuclear free Korean Peninsula, but unable to do so because of US arrogance and diplomatic intransigence.

Diplomacy Intensified

Initially, Washington's inflexibility benefited Pyongyang. China, South Korea, Japan and Russia concentrated their diplomatic efforts on pressing the United States to be more flexible as the best way to restart the Six Party Talks. Simultaneously, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow continued to push Pyongyang to return to the talks, but without making it feel threatened or isolated.

Publicly, China urged both Washington and Pyongyang to demonstrate greater flexibility. Meanwhile, its diplomats shuttled back and forth between both capitals hoping to promote flexibility. All the while, China continued its economic assistance to North Korea in the hope of augmenting its leverage in Pyongyang. Even Japan, intent upon seeing the Six Party Talks resume and hoping to resolve the abduction issue via bilateral negotiations with North Korea, adopted a similar strategy, but without providing Pyongyang any concrete economic benefits.

The Seoul government also pursued a similar strategy. While urging North Korea to rid itself of nuclear weapons, it continued construction of the Kaesong Industrial Park and other economic ventures with North Korea. Quietly at first, but then more publicly as its frustration grew, the Seoul government pressed Washington to soften its "hard line" attitude. In November 2004, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, while en route to the Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC) summit in Santiago, Chile, publicly chastised the Bush Administration's handling of the North Korean nuclear issue. The effort was blunted, however, by the South Korean government's recent efforts to minimize international censure of previous South Korean presidential administrations' failures to report to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) nuclear experiments contrary to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

This carefully coordinated diplomatic campaign eventually paid dividends. The accent on diplomacy tempered tensions in the region. Washington and Pyongyang both felt compelled to restrain their reactions to one another's verbal assaults. At the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) summit, leaders of the nations in the Six Party talks reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a diplomatic solution. This and earlier commitments to the Six Party Talks channeled energy into diplomacy instead of than less productive and militant options.

Let's Co-exist

By November, North Korea's preconditions for returning to the talks had shrunk for a long litany last July to a single demand. Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry declared on

November 13, “If the U.S. drops its hostile policy aimed at ‘bringing down the system’ the DPRK, and opts for co-existing with the DPRK in practice, it will be quite possible to settle the (nuclear) issue.” Pyongyang’s deputy UN representative clarified his government’s stance in a private unofficial mid-November meeting in New York. He explained that the U.S. could satisfy North Korea if President Bush made an official public statement that clearly indicated US willingness to pursue peaceful co-existence with the Kim Jong Il government. The North Korean diplomat confirmed this when he met two US diplomats in New York on November 30 and December 3.

The U.S. initially responded positively but hesitantly. The US State Department’s Director of Policy Planning in a December 3 statement said “co-existence (with North Korea) remains possible ...” The outgoing US chief negotiator to the Six Party Talks, James Kelly, publicly stated in mid-December that the U.S. seeks North Korea’s “transformation,” not its overthrow. Kelly also told a South Korean newspaper that the U.S. would be willing to replace the Korean War Armistice with a “multi party peace treaty,” a proposal Pyongyang had reiterated in May 2004.

Pyongyang Blunders

Meanwhile, North Korea was seeking to erode Japan’s support for Washington’s solution to the nuclear issue by engaging Tokyo in bilateral talks aimed at resolving the abduction issue. North Korea’s abduction of an unknown number of Japanese citizens more than twenty years ago had become a formidable impediment to improving bilateral relations. Prime Minister Koizumi’s unprecedented visit to Pyongyang in September 2002 seemed to have set the stage for resolution of the issue. Subsequent bilateral negotiations achieved further progress toward reconciliation.

But in mid-December, Pyongyang’s efforts to improve ties with Japan sustained a severe reversal. North Korea sought to appease Japanese public discontent by returning to Japan the remains of Yokota Megumi, one of the first and youngest of the abducted Japanese. The overture, however, backfired. Sophisticated Japanese forensic efforts reclaimed traces of DNA from the badly burned remains and scientifically proved that the remains belonged to several individuals, but not to Megumi. When the Japanese government announced its findings in mid-December, 2004, the Japanese public responded with outrage toward North Korea.

Lobbying Congress

Pyongyang tried to ignore the out cry in Japan and instead refocused on the United States. It moved to build U.S. Congressional pressure on President Bush Administration to make some conciliatory and, for Pyongyang, a “face saving” gesture to get the Six Party Talks restarted. Pyongyang’s leadership confirmed its hope in its annual New Year’s Joint Military-Party editorial on January 1, 2005. The same point was reiterated in an authoritative January 8 Foreign Ministry statement. In this latter statement, Pyongyang declared that, “If the U.S. truly wishes a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue, it

should rebuild the groundwork of the talks ...and drop its ... hostile policy aimed to 'bringing down the system' in the DPRK and opt for co-existence with it."

Two U.S. Congressional delegations visited Pyongyang in early January. Neither carried an official message from the Bush Administration nor was either delegation accompanied by any U.S. official. Thomas Lantos (Democratic, California), a ranking member of the House of Representatives International Affairs Committee, led the first delegation. He met Yang Hyong-sop, the deputy chief of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly, and Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun. Curt Weldon (Republican, Pennsylvania), a member of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, led the second group which included five other Congressmen. They met with Prime Minister Kim Yong-nam and the foreign minister.

Congressman Weldon emerged from Pyongyang claiming that the Six Party Talks would soon resume. Speaking for his entire delegation, he proclaimed, "Our unanimous impression is that the DPRK is ready to rejoin the six-party process." The Congressman added that DPRK Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's chief delegate to the Six Party Talks, had "expressed optimism that as long as the U.S. did not appear or act in a belligerent manner, they would in fact be prepared to move through serious negotiations to achieve the ultimate objective, which is the total and complete elimination of nuclear capability of the DPRK." Weldon concluded that Kim Yong Nam had express, "very positive feelings to us about his desire to have peaceful co-existence." ⁴

Cautious Optimism

Such optimism could abruptly prove premature. It ignores the fact that North Korea remains intent upon hearing President Bush verbally state that he sanctions a policy of peaceful co-existence with North Korea. Until that happens, resumption of the Six Party Talks is not likely in the foreseeable future.

This is not reason to despair, however. The continuing absence of Six Party Talks would not necessarily pose an imminent threat to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Washington remains too preoccupied with Iraq to risk an escalation of tensions in Northeast Asia. Pyongyang at the same time remains intent upon perpetuating the Kim Jong Il regime's survival through economic revitalization. Pyongyang's progress in this regard hinges on the continuation of aid from China and South Korea. Disengagement from the Six Party talks would put this assistance at risk, something North Korea can ill afford.

In short, prospects continue to improve slowly for the eventual resumption of the Six Party Talks. When depends largely on the Bush Administration's willingness to demonstrate some tactical flexibility and Pyongyang's willingness to sustain low expectations regarding what it hopes to receive from Washington. Nevertheless, the talks' resumption does not necessarily mean they could soon achieve a diplomatic resolution. Ultimately, that will require Washington and Pyongyang to first overcome

their intense mutual suspicion, followed by a narrowing of the wide gap in their respective expectations of a final resolution to the nuclear impasse on the Korean Peninsula.

End Notes

¹ Linton F. Brooks, “US Nuclear Weapons Policy and Programs,” see: Carnegie Non-proliferation Brief, Volume 7, Number 8 (July 6, 2004) npp@ceip.org.

² “Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by James A. Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Dealing with North Korea’s Nuclear Programs,” (July 15, 2004). www.fednews.com .

³ “DPRK Foreign Ministry Dismisses U.S. Proposal,” Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) (July 24, 2004). www.kcna.co.jp.

⁴ Sang-hun Choe, “North Korea Says It’s Ready to Return to Six Party Talks on Its Nuclear Program,” Associated Press (January 14, 2005). Also, Jack Kim “U.S. Legislator Sees North Korea Nuclear Talks in Weeks,” Reuters News Service (January 14, 2005).