

The Six Party Talks: The Views From Washington and Pyongyang

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I. Context for the Six Party Talks

Widely held misconceptions of the DPRK influence official and public views about North Korea. These directly affect the Bush Administration's goals and tactics for dealing with Pyongyang.

One of the more enduring perceptions is that North Korea is "aggressive" a view rooted in its 1950 effort to forcefully unify Korea. Ever since, the majority of Americans have held the view that North Korea is aggressive, untrustworthy and morally bankrupt. In recent years, the tendency to label North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il "irrational" has been replaced by the Bush Administration's preference for moralistic condemnation of Kim as being a "tyrant" and similarly derogatory characterizations.

Since the middle 1990s, Americans have acquired two relatively new but contradictory views of North Korea. Simultaneously, North Korea's most vocal US critics depict it a mini-superpower paradoxically on the verge of starvation and economic collapse. The Bush Administration has relied extensively on these characterizations to claim that Kim Jong Il and his people are desperate. Kim is seen to be desperate to sustain his regime while his people are depicted as being desperate to sustain themselves and to escape his tyranny.

The actual reality in North Korea is radically different. Beginning in 1994, North Korea replaced national unification with regime survival as its foremost goal. Russia and China's normalization of relations with South Korea ended their nuclear umbrella and altered their defense commitments to North Korea. At the same time, North Korea's worsening economic woes, a consequent in large part of declining trade with its two primary allies, undermined its economic vitality. Paralleling this was a severe decline in agricultural production, in part a consequence of nation wide floods in the late summer of 1995 that destroyed major portions of the nation's fall harvest.

These developments prematurely convinced some foreign observers to predict that North Korea would soon collapse, first economically and then politically. Obviously, this has not happened. If anything, North Korea's determined effort, combined with substantial international humanitarian aid, has enabled North Korea first to impressively increase

domestic food production while simultaneously initiating the re-invigoration and reform other sectors of its economy. Today, North Korea is far from collapse, politically and economically. On the contrary, it has restored good relations with China and Russia while significantly improving relations with its former nemesis South Korea. One consequence of this has been China and South Korea's eagerness to provide North Korea impressive amounts of economic assistance.

Another very significant consequence of international humanitarian aid is that North Korea no longer can be considered an "isolated hermit nation." Here too, it has made impressive progress toward engaging the international community since it joined the United Nations together with South Korea in 1991. Since 1999, it has established normal diplomatic and commercial relations with numerous nations in Europe, South American and Southeast Asia.

But one of the most worrisome accomplishments of North Korea in recent years has been its development of nuclear weapons. While it claims this to be a defensive move compelled by the United States' hostile policy toward it, Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons, together with short and medium range ballistic missiles, is a matter of grave concern to its neighbors and the United States. This concern spawned the Six Party Talks which first convene in Beijing, China in the summer of 2003.

II. Washington and Pyongyang's Goals

The Bush Administrations goals regarding North Korea have varied since it assumed office in 2001, but one objective has not wavered: disarming North Korea of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). These include nuclear, ballistic missiles and chemical-biological weapons (CBW). Parallel to this consensus has been continuing dueling within the Administration over whether to promote so-called "regime change" or to coerce Pyongyang into complete disarmament.

A consensus among the nations of Northeast Asia, led primarily by China and South Korea, advocated multilateral diplomacy and opposed unilateral US military action to disarm North Korea. This set the stage for the Six Party Talks.

Since the talks began in the summer of 2003, the United States has resolutely pursued its goal of North Korea's "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) of all its nuclear programs, including plutonium and uranium based, as well as peaceful electricity generating programs.

Intensive diplomacy at the Six Party Talks eventually forged a multinational consensus, which includes North Korea, that aims to make the Korean Peninsula free of all nuclear weapons and programs designed to produce them. Only the United States clings to the aspiration of compelling North Korean to rid itself of both peaceful and weapons' oriented nuclear programs and facilities.

At the same time, North Korea asserts that it seeks “peaceful co-existence” with the United States. Pyongyang insists that this include: the normalization of bilateral US-DPRK diplomatic and commercial relations, a process that would require a peace treaty to end the Korean War, the lifting of all US economic sanctions on North Korea, the admission of North Korea to international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), among others, the withdrawal of all US military personnel from South Korea and the end of the US nuclear umbrella over South Korea.

At the most recent round of Six Party Talks, the participants formulated a Joint Statement that incorporated most of the goals sought by Washington and North Korea. But sharp disagreement between Washington and Pyongyang persist over how to implement this joint statement. Of particular concern to both sides is Pyongyang’s demand that the United States provide it a light water nuclear reactor (LWR) as reward for North Korea’s willingness to return to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), compliance with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mandated nuclear safeguards and inspections, and ultimately, dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons related facilities and bombs. Washington adamantly opposes the provision of an LWR to North Korea both because this would be viewed as “rewarding” Pyongyang for its past misdeeds and would contradict its goal of CVID. Pyongyang claims it will not move to implement its promises until the US “respects is inalienable right to develop a peaceful nuclear program.” According to the terms of the NPT, North Korea, once a member in good standing both in the treaty and the IAEA, would in fact have such a right.

III. Methods – Washington’s “Strategic Resolve with Tactical Flexibility”

As previously alluded to, the Bush Administration has consistently and resolutely pursued its strategic goal of “CVID.” Although the words to describe this goal have occasionally varied, the Administration has never altered its goal.

“Tactical Flexibility” is a much more ambiguous concept. Its underlining premise is that the goal and circumstances justify the tactics to be employed. These options range from diplomatic dialogue and negotiation, to coercion using the so-called “Proliferation Security Initiative” (PSI) to interdict and possibly embargo North Korea’s exports, to even armed confrontation as justified by the Bush Administration’s doctrine on “pre-emptive counter-proliferation.”

The Administration’s preference for coercive tactics from 2001 until the summer of 2005 failed to achieve any concrete results. If anything, such tactics impeded progress toward President Bush’s avowed goal of “peaceful diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue.” Reliance on coercion paradoxically precluded the utilization of tools vital for achieving a diplomatic outcome, i.e. diplomatic dialogue and negotiation.

Washington's resolute reliance on coercive tactics appear to have been rooted in the Bush Administration's assumption that North Korea would prefer regime survival to collapse once confronted with the absence of other alternatives. First China, and then South Korea determined that North Korea's collapse was inconsistent with the national and security interests. Both nations moved to sustain political stability in North Korea by promoting its economic revitalization in return for leverage to convince it to forgo its nuclear ambitions.

Meanwhile in Washington, the Bush Administration reluctantly recognized that failure breeds pragmatism. In May 2005, after four years of unproductive coercive tactics, President Bush finally relented and sanctioned increased reliance on diplomacy to resume the Six Party Talks after a one year hiatus. The talks soon resumed, setting the stage for the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005.

IV. Pyongyang's Preference for Conciliatory Diplomacy

Meanwhile, Pyongyang concentrated on conciliatory diplomacy to compensate for the limits of its leverage vis a vis the United States and take full advantage of Washington's vulnerabilities. Early in the Six Party Talks, North Korea determined that the other participants opposed its possession of nuclear weapons but just as resolutely opposed Washington's assertive unilateralism. Ever since, North Korea has endeavored to diplomatically minimize US influence in the talks. It accomplished this by first conceding to the other participants' primary goal of de-nuclearizing the Korean Peninsula while at the same time depicting itself as a hapless target of the United States' awesome military might.

By and large, these tactics have nearly isolated the United States in the Six Party Talks process. Washington's failed coercive tactics are therefore, at least in part, a consequence of its own resolute assertiveness and unilateralism. Nevertheless, Pyongyang felt compelled to promise to forego its nuclear ambitions, but as a direct consequence it won support for its goal of setting the stage for the normalization of relations with the United States.

V. Are the Six Party Talks Working?

Undoubtedly, the answer is yes. The talks have sustained peace and stability in Northeast Asia by channeling effort into seeking a diplomatic solution and away from a resumption of escalating tensions between Washington and Pyongyang. Consensus on goals and an outline for implementation, the September 19 Joint Statement, has established a road map for achieving a peaceful diplomatic resolution. The United States appears to have learned, finally, the limits of its military might and recognized its East Asian allies and friends preference for peace and stability in the region so that they might continue their pursuit of prosperity while peacefully achieving the phasing out of weapons of mass destruction from the Korean Peninsula. North Korea on the other hand, has had to accept that it must eventually give up its nuclear weapons ambitions and phase out this

capability if it wishes to join in the regions prosperity. None of this would have been possible without the Six Party Talks.

VI. Future Prospects

Near term prospects for the next round of talks, which are expected to commence on November 8, 2005, are rather bleak. Once again, the United States and North Korea are at odds over a common concern. Washington adamantly opposes North Korea's possession of any nuclear program, peaceful or otherwise, and has ruled out either sanctioning or contributing to the construction of an LWR in North Korea.

Pyongyang is equally adamant that the US must provide it an LWR to demonstrate its political will to respect North Korea's sovereignty, to reward it for having initiated the processing of disarming itself of nuclear weapons, and as a joint confident building measure designed to forge trust between the two enemies. So long as this remains unresolved, progress toward a peaceful diplomatic resolution will be impeded.

Longer term prospects, however, favor a peaceful resolution. The price of failure remains the primary inducement for success. Failure could result in a second Korean War which would wreck havoc across the region and severely disrupt world commerce and communication while also posing the threat of a nuclear war. This reality should help concentrate the participants' attention on diplomacy. Success ultimately will be determined by the willingness of Washington and Pyongyang to put the region's common concerns ahead of their own unilateral priorities.