

**Status of the Six Party Talks and
Future Prospects**

By

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INTRODUCTION - Faltering but Not Finished

The short answer is that the Six Party talks remain at an impasse, but they are not necessarily finished. Nor have they failed. The main difference now, compared to June 2004 when China last hosted representatives from Japan, North and South Korea, Russia, and the United States, is that these concerned nations have not yet agreed to again meet for another round of multilateral talks in Beijing or another venue. Despite the lack of any substantial progress during the past nearly one year, their goal of finding a peaceful diplomatic path to ensure a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula remains a hope, albeit an uncertain and distant one. On the bright side, peace persists in Northeast Asia and tensions there remain restrained. All the concerned nations continue their intense diplomatic dialogue. So long as their “quiet” diplomacy persists, there is hope that the Six Party Talks will eventually resume.

A major contributing cause for diplomacy’s persistence is the collective fear of the alternative. Relatively speaking, at least at the present time, war remains a less likely outcome than a peaceful resolution. Without the Six Party Talks, tensions would certainly escalate beyond their current elevated but still restrained level. If the talks were to falter and fail, war would not necessarily become inevitable. But the region’s economic dynamism, particularly investment within the region, could be adversely affected. Restoration of the diplomatic process would also become much more difficult. Over the long term, the risk of a second Korean War would increase.

Peace or War?

Today, however, the region’s nations recognize that modern weapons would make a second Korean War far more destructive than was the case in 1950-53. During the first Korean War (1950-53), the Korean Peninsula’s geography contained the combat and its destruction to a relatively small area. The United States and the Soviet Union restrained their mutual hostility and managed to avoid a potentially global nuclear holocaust. Despite the terrible suffering inflicted on Korea’s civilian population, at least the Japanese and Chinese civilian populations were spared a similar terrible fate.

A second Korean War, however, would wreck far more havoc. Today’s weapons of mass destruction would cause immeasurable human suffering not only on the Korean Peninsula, but possibly far beyond. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) now possesses ballistic missiles that could strike targets not only in South Korea but Japan. Japan during the previous Korean War was a defeated, disarmed and impoverished nation. Today, Japan is a key ally of the DPRK’s nemesis the United States and hosts numerous US military facilities certain to become targets of the DPRK’s ballistic missiles in the event of a future war on the Korean Peninsula. More worrisome is the possibility that the world could again face the possible trauma and destruction of a nuclear holocaust. The DPRK’s recent claims of possessing a “nuclear deterrence capability” suggest the possibility that it, and/or the United States as well might use such weapons.

In any event, both the threat of or actually war in the region would severely disrupt the world economy. Northeast Asia a half century ago was one of the world's most impoverished area, a consequence of a century of war and imperialism. It since has emerged as the center of international production, trade and commerce. The price of another Korean War, both in human and economic terms, would explode beyond comprehension.

Given the options of a peaceful or an armed resolution, the nations of Northeast Asia remain intensely focused on achieving a peaceful solution. This is particularly true of China, South Korea and Japan. Thus they remain in the forefront of the "quiet" diplomatic effort. Russian interests certainly would not be served by war, and it too has been intensely involved in the diplomatic campaign but in a less apparent manner.

Fortunately for all concerned, the consensus forged early in the Six Party Talks process remains intact. All the parties, including the primary antagonists the United States and the DPRK, continue to reaffirm their commitment to pursuing a peaceful diplomatic resolution. The inability of Washington and Pyongyang to agree on the best way to proceed toward a peaceful solution persists as the primary impediment to progress.

Dangerous Dueling

Ever since the talks stalled in July 2004, Washington and Pyongyang have engaged in a diplomatic boxing match. North Korea's Supreme Commander Kim Jong Il and US President George Bush claim frequently and loudly that they want a "peaceful diplomatic solution" to the Korean Peninsula's nuclear woes, but their strategies for attaining this goal have been dismal failures. Pyongyang insists it cannot return to the talks until Washington drops its "hostile policy." The Bush Administration adamantly rejects North Korea's allegation. Washington's inflexibility since last July initially benefited Pyongyang. Beijing and Seoul repeatedly but unsuccessfully urged Washington to demonstrate greater flexibility toward North Korea. Even Japan, intent upon seeing the Six Party Talks resume and hoping to resolve the abduction issue via bilateral negotiations with North Korea, pressed the U.S. to be more flexible. Nevertheless, the dueling has persisted and tensions consequently intensified.

Kim Jong Il since July 2004 has attempted both "smile" and "plutonium" diplomacy to convince Washington to demonstrate greater flexibility in its dealings with the DPRK. From July 2004 to January 2005, Kim successfully cast the United States in the role of villain. It repeatedly and convincingly argued that Washington's "hostile policy" toward it and "pre-emptive counter proliferation strategy" threatened the DPRK's existence and blocked Pyongyang's desire for "friendly relations" with the United States.

But Pyongyang at the same time pushed for a long litany of concessions from the United States. These ranged from direct bilateral US-DPRK dialogue and negotiations, a "step by step" approach to phasing out its nuclear weapons development program matched with a simultaneous normalization of bilateral relations, plus extensive economic assistance. At the same time, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia worked to push Pyongyang back

to the talks, but without making it feel threatened or isolated. Their combined effort seems to have paid dividends. By November, 2004, North Korea's preconditions for returning to the talks had shrunk from the long list of July 2004 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 UN representatives clarified their government's stance in a private unofficial mid-November meeting in New York. They explained that the U.S. could satisfy the DPRK 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 the DPRK'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.

"Smile" Diplomacy – Pyongyang Style

The DPRK at the same time intensified its "smile" diplomacy by inviting two US Congressional delegations to Pyongyang. 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.

Pyongyang's leaders apparently hoped that the Congressmen could convince President Bush to make conciliatory remarks regarding the DPRK either in his January 20 inauguration speech or his February 2 State of the Union speech. This was apparent in the DPRK's January 1, 2005 Joint New Year Editorial and in a 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,"

Pyongyang got the opposite of what it sought. President Bush said nothing conciliatory about the DPRK in both his major policy speeches. Instead, his new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at her January 18, 2005 confirmation hearing told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the DPRK is "an outpost of tyranny."

Reversion to “Plutonium” Diplomacy

Soon after, the DPRK reverted to “plutonium” diplomacy. On February 10, 2005, the DPRK Foreign Ministry confirmed that the DPRK had broken all of its previous pledges and built nuclear weapons. It pointed to the Bush Administration’s long record of belittling the DPRK’s leader, reiterated its allegation that the United States’ hostility toward it threatened its survival and declared that the DPRK possessed nuclear weapons. Pyongyang subsequently asserted its “sovereign right” to discontinue its six year old moratorium and resume the testing and development of ballistic missiles. Most recently, it shut down its 5 megawatt reactor at its Yongbyon Nuclear Research Facility and declared that it would soon begin reprocessing the 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods that it had extracted from the reactor. If this is done, it is estimated that the DPRK would then possess enough plutonium to fabricate 8 to 12 nuclear weapons.

At the same time, nevertheless, Pyongyang has continued to declare that its “principled” position is to return to the Six Party Talks, but only after the Bush Administration drops its “hostile policy” and “switches to a policy of peaceful co-existence.” It also says there first must be a “mature atmosphere,” and that the U.S. must demonstrate its “sincerity” by apologizing for Dr. Rice’s January 18, 2005 claim that North Korea is an “outpost of tyranny.” Pyongyang’s hope for such an U.S. apology is unrealistic. But North Korea’s typical negotiating strategy is to demand far more than it can realistically expect to receive. Eventually, Pyongyang usually accepts less than it originally demanded. In the end, Pyongyang wins. It gets less than it demanded, but wins more than it originally possessed.

North Korea’s coercive strategy obviously is not the way to foster friendship and defuse hostility. On the contrary, the international response to the DPRK’s “plutonium diplomacy” has been uniformly negative.

The Bush Administration’s Version of Failure

Nor have President Bush’s “pre-emptive” nuclear non-proliferation strategy and moralistic criticism of Kim Jong Il promoted progress toward a peaceful solution. Common sense dictates that a diplomatic solution requires diplomacy. But Bush began with the opposite - by declaring the unilateral right of “pre-emptive” nuclear attack on members of his self proclaimed “axis of evil.” He declared the DPRK Korea unworthy of being the United States negotiating partner and repeatedly belittled its leader as a “tyrant who starves his people,” a claimed he made as recently as April 28, 2005 at a press conference. The Bush Administration has also been inflexible in its demand that the DPRK unilaterally and without concessions submit to “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” of all its nuclear programs, civilian and military. Such a demand is tantamount to unilateral disarmament.

At the same time, the Bush Administration has frequently and publicly urged Beijing to intensify its pressure on North Korea, even to the point of denying it much needed economic aid. Washington prevailed on Seoul to restrict its economic cooperation with

Pyongyang. Additionally, the United States quickened the pace of preparations to implement the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). This multilateral effort is designed to apply international legal sanctions and military action to prevent trade in all materials and technology related to weapons of mass destruction. Washington identified the DPRK as a primary candidate for PSI's possible enforcement.

When the DPRK proved unresponsive, the Bush Administration moved to shut down all official channels of communication between Washington and Pyongyang. DPRK diplomats cannot travel to the U.S. capital. Since December 2004, US diplomats have been under instructions not to discuss the nuclear and other substantive bilateral US-DPRK issues with their DPRK counterparts at the DPRK's Mission to the United Nations in New York. Beginning in January 2005, DPRK diplomats have been denied visas to visit the United States and have not been allowed to travel outside New York to points within the United States. Also, in mid-October, a U.S. diplomat went to New York to tell DPRK diplomats that the U.S. would not resume food aid to North Korea until further notice. These steps climaxed with Dr. Rice's "outpost of tyranny" comment on January 18, 2005.

Beginning in March 2005, following Pyongyang's February 10 declaration that it had become a nuclear power, the Bush Administration appears to have adopted a dual track approach. The new US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, during her visit to East Asia March 17 – 21, 2005, reiterated the Bush Administration basic position of "CVID" and urging of China to do more. But at least she publicly conceded that the DPRK is an "independent sovereign state." Obviously, such comments lack the potency needed to entice Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.

Double Failure Equals Failure

The double failure of Pyongyang's and Washington's coercive strategies has not, and is very unlikely to add up to success for the Six Party Talks. The strident public remarks by Kim Jong Il and George Bush have painted each into their respective corner and left little room for compromise, which is the essence of diplomacy. Both sides intransigence has played into the other sides "hardliners." Pyongyang's coercive "plutonium" diplomacy has only heightened tensions with the United States. Washington's reiteration of its "other options including a military option" has lonely convinced the DPRK's generals that they must have a nuclear arsenal. The divergence of both sides away from moderation in their rhetoric and avowed options has severely diminished prospects for the resumption of the Six Party Talks Process.

In Washington, Vice President Chaney and others influential figures in the Bush Administration now appear to favor more unilateral and assertive approaches for dealing with the DPRK. They argue that the passage of time favors the DPRK because more time allows it to strengthen its nuclear weapons capability. Some well placed officials, speaking off the record, have implied that the Administration's hardliners now favor compelling China to end all its economic aid to the DPRK in the hope that this would

bring about the end of the Kim Jong Il regime. Otherwise, the United States should implement its “military option,” which would mean war.

Secretary of State Rice, on the other hand, still prefers diplomacy. She continues to urge China and other participants in the Six Party Talks to convince the DPRK to return to the process. In doing so, she concurs with US allies like South Korea offering Pyongyang inducements. Her fall back position is to have the DPRK nuclear issue taken up in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Rice’s apparent hope is to gain more time for diplomacy and delay President Bush’s possible approval of implementation of his “military option.” But UNSC action could backfire in that the DPRK’s hardliners might use it as reason to further stiffen their government’s stance and reject the Six Party Talks.

Obviously, new, more effective strategies are urgently needed if a “peaceful diplomatic solution” is to be achieved. Possibly Secretary Rice’s most challenging task will be to convince President Bush that he must adopt a much less rigid and assertive stance if indeed he truly seeks a peaceful. Simply shifting from his previous tough talk to smile diplomacy will be insufficient to restore Pyongyang’s confidence in the Six Party Talks process. President Bush must also cease trying to use China as his hammer to pound the DPRK into submission to his demand of ‘CVID.’ On the contrary, Bush would do well to listen to his allies South Korea and Japan and adopt their confidence in using inducements to entice Pyongyang back into the diplomatic process.

Subtle Reasons for Optimism

Actually there are some indications that the Six Party Talks could resume in the near future. Pyongyang continues to reiterate its willingness to return to the talks. At the same time, the Bush Administration remains deeply divided over how best to deal with North Korea.

President Bush appears to have positioned himself mid-point between the principle factions in his Administration. So-called “moderates,” who are based in the Department of State, continue to accent diplomacy while so-called “neo-cons” or “hardliners” prefer coercive tactics. Bush in his public remarks emphasizes a diplomatic resolution but insists on utterance blunt criticism of North Korea’s leader and his political system.

The gap between the Administration’s avowed preference for diplomacy and often coercive action continues to confuse the situation. On May 24, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld “suspended” the US Army’s decade long effort to locate and recover the remains of US soldiers who had died in North Korea during the Korean War. Pyongyang had long considered this effort an informal US “security assurance” that the US would not attack North Korea, at least while US soldiers were working in North Korea. At the same time, the Defense Department confirmed as “routine” the dispatch of 15 additional F-117 Stealth fighter-bombers to South Korea. Then on May 30, Vice President Cheney on CNN’s “Larry King Live” program labeled Kim Jong Il “one of the world’s most irresponsible leaders” who “runs a police state.” President Bush apparently sought to calm the atmosphere when on June 1 he referred to North Korea’s leader as “Mr. Kim”

instead of Bush's usual labeling of Kim a "dangerous" man who is also a "tyrant." Bush once again reiterated his preference for diplomacy over "other options."

Pyongyang's reaction thus far has mirror imaged Washington's split personality. Pyongyang's official line is that it is confused by Washington's words and deeds. On the one hand, North Korea's official media repeatedly blasts Washington's pointed rhetoric and alleged hostile actions. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Il has made clear through his senior diplomats and government's official announcements that he is waiting for "face saving" gestures from both China and the United States. China's gesture appears to have been agreed upon in the form of a future visit by Chinese leader Hu Jindao to the DPRK. The visit's timing has yet to be decided, but this most likely will be settled quickly once Pyongyang publicly pledges that it is ready to return to the Six Party Talks.

Kim Jong Il appears to be waiting now for President Bush to make a "face saving" gesture. Actually, Washington extended several "olive branches" to Pyongyang in mid-May. It responded positively to Pyongyang May 8 suggestion of convening a "New York channel" meeting in New York. Two senior State Department officials met with their North Korean counterparts on May 13 in New York. They promised that the Bush Administration would:

- reopen the so-called "New York channel" for sustained substantive dialogue,
 - resume direct bilateral diplomatic dialogue with Pyongyang under the umbrella of the Six Party Talks,
 - and agree to discuss the specifics of security assurances,
- if North Korea returned to the Six Party Talks. As of early June 2005, Washington was still waiting for Pyongyang's response to this proposal.

Meanwhile, Beijing and Seoul continue their efforts to induce Pyongyang to return to the talks. Beijing has also significantly increased its investment in North Korea over the past year [Barbara Slavin, "China, U.S. Come at North Korea from Different Angles, *USA Today* (June 2, 2005) A5.]. Then in early May, China rebuffed Bush Administration efforts to convince Beijing to halt, at least temporarily, its substantial economic assistance to North Korea [Glenn Kessler, "China Rejected U.S. Suggestion to Cut off Oil to Pressure North Korea," *Washington Post* (May 7, 2005) A11]. South Korea meanwhile continues its economic cooperation policy toward North Korea. The most active element of this policy is the continuing development of the Kaesong Industrial Project. In mid-May, a vice ministerial delegation traveled from Seoul to Kaesong for long stalled North-South official talks. Resumption of the North-South Ministerial talks, stalled since July 2004, are scheduled to resume on June 21 in Seoul. [ROK Ministry of Unification, "The Achievements and Meanings of the Inter-Korean Vice Ministerial Talks," Seoul: May 20, 2005].

In any event, the present situation is preferable because peace prevails and hope prevails that the Six Party Talks will eventually resume. However, if Washington and Pyongyang fail to formulate a face saving accommodation in the next couple of months, the talks could end without any concrete progress. Tensions in Northeast Asia would again escalate and the possibility of a second Korean War would again increase. For the time

being, patience and quiet diplomacy are sustaining peace, and the hope of a diplomatic solution.

If and when the Six Party Talks resume, however, the attainment of a diplomatic solution is certain to be more difficult than one year ago.