

## **What Happened to the Six Party Talks?**

**By**

**Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones**

**For the**

**Sanyo Shimbun**

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First, there was no progress in Beijing at the last round of Six Party Talks, and then silence every since. Some might argue that the talks are close to failure. Others see reason for optimism. It is always darkest before dawn, optimists like to say in America.

Instead of headlines, the talks are making quiet, slow progress toward a peaceful diplomatic solution. This is, after all, everyone's wish. Since the "three party" talks (China, North Korea and the USA) convened a year ago, the diplomacy has reduced tensions in Northeast Asia and the possibility that North Korea might become another Iraq. The process has narrowed Pyongyang's options. North Korea has given up demanding direct bilateral talks with the United States and accepted multilateral talks. Powerful North Korean officials have stopped talking about maintaining a "nuclear deterrence" to defend against the United States. Since last December, their rhetoric has become less belligerent and they have offered to freeze and eventually dismantle their nuclear weapons program. Then in February, Pyongyang ceased asserting its "sovereign right" to have a nuclear deterrence, and instead claims only that it should be able to keep a "civilian nuclear program."

Additionally, Pyongyang sent it's diplomatic "dream team" to February's Six Party Talks. Kim Gye-kwan, the team leader, is a sophisticated senior diplomat with extensive experience in dealing with the United States. He has the confidence and support of North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il's closest foreign policy advisers, Premier Kim Yong-nam, who severed Kim's father for many years as foreign minister, and his long time deputy Kang Sok Ju. Their priorities are to achieve a negotiated settlement in exchange for maximum benefits for North Korea.

Everything Pyongyang has done so far can be labeled "diplomatic posturing." It has not committed itself to any deal, and can quickly resume its hostile ways and the building of a nuclear arsenal. But its shifts probably are more than mere posturing. They follow China, Russia and South Korea's efforts between the first and second rounds of the six party talks to bring Washington and Pyongyang closer together. These efforts convinced the Bush Administration to sanction a "step by step" diplomatic process that included giving North Korea multilateral security assurances.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the same three nations probably drew a "red line" on Pyongyang and warned that if it made and tested nuclear weapons, it would estrange itself from them and forgo their economic inducements. Subsequently, Pyongyang agreed to meet Washington half way by offering to shut down its plutonium nuclear program. But Washington continued to demand that Pyongyang end all its nuclear

programs, including the highly enriched uranium (HEU) program that Washington believes Pyongyang is hiding.

China and South Korea intensified their diplomatic effort. They appear to have convinced Kim Jong Il that he has more to gain from a diplomatic solution than from building a nuclear arsenal. To emphasize this, South Korea offered grain, chemical fertilizer and investment in a new industrial zone near Kaesong, North Korea. China promised similar economic benefits that included \$50 million investment in new industrial infrastructure. Russia sent food aid and expanded training programs in advanced technology for North Koreans.

Pyongyang, by posturing, put itself in a position of either cooperating with China, South Korea and Russia or losing the benefits they offered. What began as posturing became a significant shift in Pyongyang's position. But Washington's persistent inflexibility impeded progress at the Six Party Talks' second round.

Ever since, Beijing, Seoul and Moscow have concentrated on making Washington more flexible. Even Tokyo has sided with this effort. A steady stream of senior diplomats visited Washington in March. They included South Korea's Foreign Minister, and the Deputy Foreign Ministers from Beijing, Moscow and Tokyo. Washington has to be careful not to isolate itself by continuing to insist on an "all or nothing" deal.

So far, the Six Party process has made steady progress toward forging the conceptual outline for a comprehensive deal. As China has summarized after each round, all the parties agree to the need for a negotiated settlement and to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. Five of the six parties also agree that on the need for "coordinated steps" that phase out North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for concessions. Only Washington still objects to this. It wants Pyongyang to give up everything first before anyone gives it anything. North Korea rejects this. In short, three problems await resolution: when to give Pyongyang anything, how much to give it and how much it must give up?

The continuing quiet diplomacy aims to narrow the gap between Washington and Pyongyang on these issues. If and when this happens, productive "working level talks" can then convene. The purpose of such talks is to work out the details of an over all deal, not to resolve major impediments to a deal. The best estimates suggest working level talks might not occur until early June.

Paradoxically, this situation gives Tokyo and Pyongyang an opportunity to move toward a resolution of the abduction Japanese issue. Pyongyang wants Tokyo to nudge Washington toward a negotiated nuclear deal. Tokyo wants Pyongyang to release the abducted Japanese family members. Tokyo cannot and should not ask Washington to soften its demand that North Korea give up all weapons of mass destruction programs. This is contrary to Tokyo's foremost goal of national security. But Tokyo can encourage Washington to be more flexible regarding strategy by sanctioning the "coordinated steps" concept. If Washington does this, Tokyo could offer Pyongyang a deal. Tokyo, with

Washington's backing, could tell Pyongyang that Washington will accept "coordinated steps," but only if Pyongyang releases the abducted Japanese family members. Everyone's interests would be served. Without such deals, diplomacy is impossible.