

**The Six Party Talks –
The Ball is Back in Washington’s Court
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July 22, 2005**

Finally, after a year of intense diplomacy, the Six Party Talks have resumed. It has taken one year for diplomats from six of the world’s most important nations to restart these talks. Their persistence is most admirable because without successful diplomacy, Northeast Asia today could face the possibility of a second Korean War. Instead, fortunately, well informed people around the world are now competing to predict what will happen at the talks. Honestly speaking, no one can really know.

Glancing at the recent past, however, can sharpen our focus of the future. Before we do so, we must resolve to be very candid and honest with ourselves. Frankly, we must admit that North Korea has and will continue to play the most decisive role in this continuing diplomatic drama. Without its participation, the talks could not resume and would surely collapse. It is probably very unpopular in Washington and Tokyo to admit this, but North Korea has maintained a consistent position since the last round of talks. Month after month, its Foreign Ministry has repeated, “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s principled position is to return to the talks” once there is an “appropriate atmosphere.” Unfortunately, too many people, especially in Washington, dismissed these words as hollow and unreliable. Obviously, they were wrong.

North Korea’s leadership, including Chairman Kim Jong Il, has demonstrated the sincerity of their words in several ways. First, they promised and will now return to the talks. But before this, North Korea demonstrated patience, persistence and flexibility in the face of the Bush Administration’s contradictory words and deeds. On the one hand, President Bush and his senior officials repeatedly proclaimed their goal to be a “peaceful diplomatic resolution” of the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. But at the same time, they refused to take the actions necessary to achieve this goal. Instead, President Bush refused to permit diplomatic dialogue and negotiation with North Korea. Simply stated, it is impossible to achieve a diplomatic solution without diplomacy.

At the same time, the Bush Administration has continuously rejected Pyongyang’s claims that US policy toward North Korea is “hostile.” Again, frankly speaking, US policy has been and continues to be “hostile.” This has been true since the Korean War except for a brief period beginning with former President Bush and continuing into the Clinton Administration. The incumbent President Bush now relies on a strategy of “neo-containment.” This maintains the extensive economic sanctions which the US first imposed on North Korea during the Korean War plus those mandated when North Korea was put on the so-called “terrorist list” nearly twenty years ago. They are reinforced by

the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) which the Bush Administration invented. Also, the Bush Administration has sustained a formidable military force in Northeast Asia that concentrates on deterring possible “North Korean aggression.”

Bush’s “neo-containment” strategy is essentially coercive, not defensive as was the case under his father’s administration and President Clinton. President Bush’s demand that North Korea first promise “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID)” of all its nuclear programs, civilian and military, rules out any possibility of diplomatic negotiation while insisting on unilateral disarmament. President Bush also asserted the United States’ unilateral right to “pre-emptive” attack on any nation it deemed a threat to its security. Such a provocative assertion contradicts international law, particularly the United Nations Charter, and in fact directly threatens North Korea as a member of Bush’s “axis of evil.”

All the while over the past year, North Korea has not once threatened military action against any nation. On the contrary, all of its official statements have emphasized its determination to deter the possibility of a US attack. Recently, Pyongyang has pressed for reciprocal disarmament. At the very least, this idea merits serious consideration.

These views may make some people uncomfortable, and they may ardently disagree with them. But if the Six Party Talks are to succeed and peace in Northeast Asia preserved, it is time to be honest with ourselves. North Korea can be blamed for many problems, but it is not the sole source of all the problems in Northeast Asia. The United States and its allies must accept at least partial responsibility for some of the region’s problems, particularly regarding security issues.

In the final analysis, progress at the next round of Six Party Talks will depend largely on whether the United States changes its fundamental attitude toward North Korea. If Washington stubbornly refuses to at least moderate its hostility toward North Korea, there will be no progress toward a diplomatic solution. The Bush Administration has at least restrained temporarily its negative rhetoric. Successful diplomacy, however, must be accompanied by more than mere words. Clearly, the ball is now in Washington’s court to demonstration through its actions sincerity regarding achieving a peaceful diplomatic solution.