

The Six Party Talks – Almost There?

By

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones

Former North Korea Affairs Director

U.S. Department of State

For

Sanyo Shimbun

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In America, there is a famous question, “Are we almost there?” American children frequently ask their parents this question while on a long car drive. Now the participants in the Six Party Talks – China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States are asking North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, “Are you almost there?” Of course, they are referring to North Korea’s return to the Six Party Talks which have been suspended for more than one year.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza is in East Asia the week of July 11 to answer this question. For several months Kim Jong Il has been saying, “We will return to the Six Party talks, but ...” Each time he has recited a list of preconditions for North Korea’s return. Rice will tell her counterparts in Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo that it is time for North Korea to get back into the talks, or else the United States will pursue other options.

Secretary Rice’s second visit trip to East Asia this year sets an unusual precedent for any US secretary of state. Obviously, the visit has special significance. First of all, it demonstrates that President Bush has finally decided on a single course of action and he has put her in charge. Her top priority will be to exchange views with China and US allies Japan and South Korea on how best to deal with North Korea. She will emphasize that the United States has demonstrated maximum flexibility to induce Pyongyang back to the Six Party Talks. If this Plan A, launched in May, fails, she will work with Seoul and Tokyo to refine Plan B.

Plan A assumes that North Korea can be enticed back to the talks. Prospects for accomplishing this have been improving since May 13 when US and North Korean diplomats met at a “New York Channel” meeting, the first since early December 2004. In mid-June, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il told South Korea’s visiting Reunification minister that Pyongyang “will return to the Six Party Talks, but first the United States must demonstrate respect.”

Washington now believes that it has demonstrated respect and much more. At the May 13 “New York Channel” meeting, senior American diplomats offered Pyongyang important concessions. First they promised to reopen the “New York Channel” for diplomatic dialogue between senior US diplomats in Washington and their counterparts at North Korea’s United Nations Mission. The Americans also assured Pyongyang that direct bilateral diplomatic dialogue could continue “under the umbrella of the Six Party Talks,” once North Korea rejoined the talks. But Pyongyang had an additional demand:

withdraw Secretary Rice's January 2005 description of North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny."

Washington promptly rejected this last demand, but then staged a "track two" symposium in New York on June 29 and 30 to demonstrate respect for North Korea and the earnestness of its May 13 promises. First, the White House authorized issuance of a visa for North Korean Foreign Ministry Director General of North American Affairs Ri Gun so he could attend the New York symposium. The aim was to erase bad feelings created when he was denied a US visa in January 2005.

Then the privately sponsored symposium was designed to resemble a working group meeting of the Six Party Talks. Each participating nation was invited to dispatch a senior diplomat to the New York gathering. Japan sent its chief delegate to the Six Party Talks, as did China and South Korea. Since Ri Gun is North Korea's number two delegate to the Six Party Talks, Washington sent its number two representative, Ambassador Joseph DeTrani. Representatives from the National Security Council and the State Department's Office of Korea Affairs accompanied DeTrani. Russia's Political Minister in Washington also attended.

Finally, the American diplomats demonstrated sincerity and respect for the North Koreans by repeatedly engaging them in private diplomatic dialogue at exclusive and expensive Manhattan restaurants. At their final private session on July 1, the Americans essentially told the North Koreans, "O.K. We have now demonstrated sincerity and respect, so its time for Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks." North Korea's Ambassador Ri responded, "Yes, but you must still withdraw the "outpost of tyranny" statement. The US adamantly answered, "No." Ri ended the dialogue by essentially saying, "O.K. we (North Korea) wants to rejoin the Six Party Talks, but ..." first he had to return home and report to his government.

If Pyongyang's ultimate response is, "No," Secretary Rice will explain Plan B to Beijing and seek Seoul and Tokyo's approval and cooperation for it. Plan B accents multilateral diplomacy at the United Nations aimed at compelling North Korea back to the Six Party Talks. It focuses on having Japan, as the UN Security Council's temporary president (a position it assumes in August), rally support for a resolution that censures North Korea and urges its return to the talks. Beijing and Moscow are expected to support the resolution since no reference to economic sanctions is envisioned. A similar resolution might be circulated in the UN General Assembly after it convenes in September. If the escalation of multilateral diplomatic pressure does not convince North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks, the United States and its allies Japan and South Korea will consult on Plan C, other options.

The odds, however favor North Korea's return to the Six Party Talks in the near future. All but Pyongyang prefer that the talks resume at the earliest possible date. Late July might be the best time. From the United States' point of view, August is not a good time for international meetings. The US government will virtually stop working because

President Bush and his closest advisers, plus their staffs, will be on vacations. The entire United States Congress will also be on vacation.

September is not a good time for the talks to reconvene. Vacations will have ended, but most governments around the world will devote early September to preparing to attend the United Nations General Assembly which commences in the latter half of September. Also, "Plan B" is to be launched in September if the Six Party Talks have either not resumed, or restarted but collapsed.

Next time, for certain, we will explore the positions that the United States and North Korea are expected to table once the Six Party Talks resume.

Comment: This essay reflects what the author learned in his own, separate private discussions with several of the officials (including the North Korean delegation) after the June 29-30 New York symposium concluded.