

## **The Six Party Talks – A Never Ending Story?**

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The Six Party Talks are like a drama without an ending. Since the spring of 2003, two and one half years ago, some of the world's most important nations have gathered in Beijing to forge a peaceful diplomatic solution to the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula. Each meeting in Beijing has excited expectations of a diplomatic break through. But each time the results have fallen short of these expectations. Instead of becoming frustrated with this "never ending story," the wiser options would be to temper our expectations and to review the benefits of the Six Party Talks...

Frankly speaking, the mass media, more than the diplomats, are the true source of popular frustration with the Six Party Talks. Actually, the diplomats have been making respectable and steady progress toward a diplomatic solution. The problem, from the point of view of journalists (especially their editors), is that slow, steady diplomatic progress does not make dramatic headlines. Obviously, the recently ended round of the Six Party Talks did not make exciting news. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of all the concerned nations to have the steady, slow progress continue. Otherwise, the news could become too exciting. If the talks collapse, tensions will quickly intensify, setting the stage for a possible confrontation in Northeast Asia.

Looking back to 2003 will better enable us to realize how much progress has been accomplished, and how much more progress is necessary to achieve a peaceful diplomatic solution.

Beginning in October 2002, the United States and North Korea launched a contest of political wills. The Bush Administration demanded that North Korea give up its nuclear weapons programs, or else, President Bush repeatedly warned, it would have to contend with Washington's "other option," its military might. But the Kim Jong Il regime refused to submit to Bush's demands. Instead, Pyongyang moved to match not only Washington's rhetoric, but also its threat of armed confrontation.

China's diplomatic initiative brought the two adversaries' representatives to Beijing in April 2003. At these "three party talks," North Korea warned that it had developed a "nuclear capability." The Bush Administration dismissed the claim, but decided not to risk confrontation. North Korea's self proclaimed nuclear capability combined with the United States military's preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan may have convinced

the Bush Administration, more than China's intense diplomacy, to pursue a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue in Northeast Asia.

Over the past two years, the Six Party Talks have defined separate roles for each of the participants. Obviously, the main adversaries are North Korea and the United States. China and South Korea play the role of intermediaries. Japan and Russia stay in the background, but all the while assure the main participants of their desire for a peaceful diplomatic solution and willingness to contribute to its successful implementation.

The balanced division of responsibility sustains the Six Party Talks. It gives the talks stability and durability. Four of the nations – China, Japan, South Korea and Russia – work to keep the two adversaries – North Korea and the United States – focused on diplomacy rather than “other options.” Simultaneously, China and South Korea exert economic leverage on North Korea while applying diplomatic pressure to the United States. Their aim is to restrain both sides' tempers and rhetoric while nudging them toward the common ground vital for forging a diplomatic solution.

The process is hardly exciting, but it has been undeniably successful. Tensions and concern about the risk of confrontation in Northeast Asia have subsided significantly over the past two years. At least, the Bush Administration appears to be restraining its rhetoric. Since May 2005, it has shifted to engaging in quiet diplomatic dialogue with North Korean diplomats in New York and Beijing, something it refused to do two years ago. North Korea has responded by tabling negotiating positions that encompass its return to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), plus the resumption of IAEA inspections.

In other words, the two adversaries have finally stopped their yelling and threats, and instead have begun outlining a possible diplomatic resolution. Profound impediments persist. These include North Korea's desire to retain its “sovereign right” to possess a peaceful nuclear power program, reciprocity regarding the “de-nuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula, and a new “peace mechanism” to replace the Korean War Armistice. But at long last the impediments are coming into clearer focus. Even more important is the United States' long awaited willingness to demonstrate some flexibility in its stance and to consider exchanging concessions with North Korea.

Surely, all of this is substantial progress. Granted, it has taken much boring diplomacy to achieve this progress. Given the choice between boring progress and dramatic news, surely the majority of people in Northeast Asia prefer the less dramatic, peaceful process that the Six Party Talks promises. The pace of progress toward a peaceful diplomatic resolution may seem like a “never ending story,” but such a process greatly enhances prospects for a peaceful outcome. After all, erasing half a century of animosity between the United States and North Korea cannot be accomplished quickly.