

**Prospects for the Six Party Talks and
North Korea's Negotiating Tactics**

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The Six Party talks between China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States regarding the impasse over North Korea's nuclear ambitions are poised to resume on February 25, 2004. It has taken five months of diplomatic effort to set the stage for the second round. All the participants, except North Korea, have repeatedly professed their desire to continue the talks. Lingering mutual mistrust and intense animosity in Washington and Pyongyang could, however, further stall the talks. Here we concentrate on North Korea to examine its tactics, and also assess prospects for the next round.

North Korea likes to avoid any appearance that it is anxious to engage in these talks. This is typical North Korean negotiating tactics. In this way, Pyongyang hopes to maximize the benefits to gains from the other participants while minimizing the concessions it must give them. Since the first round concluded in Beijing last August, Pyongyang has repeatedly proclaimed its reluctance to participate in future Six Party Talks. At the same time, however, it has continued to hold the door open to attending another round, but only if it receives security assurances, and is convinced that the United States has relinquished its "hostile" policy toward North Korea and is willing to contribute material aid to sustain the Kim Jong Il regime.

Struggle for the "Great Leader"

After four month of haggling, we might anticipate that winning one of its three key demands is sufficient to induce Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. But again we encounter typical North Korean negotiating tactics. North Korea's diplomats always demand more than they can realistically expect to obtain. During negotiations, they "struggle" intensely to achieve these unrealistic goals. They do so less out of the expectation that they will get everything that they demand. Instead, their more likely goal is to impress their "Great Leader" Kim Jong Il with their sincerity and devotion to him. Also, of course, it is important that they bring him maximum gains for minimum concessions. Ultimately, when the other side appears to have exhausted its flexibility, Pyongyang's leadership directs that the "struggle" cease so it can consolidate its gains.

Security Assurances – Priority One

At the end of June, Pyongyang appears to have made the decision to shift from "struggle" back to the negotiating table. Since the first round in August, it has made some significant gains. Most importantly, Pyongyang has won multilateral agreement to give it "security assurances." This has been a top priority for Pyongyang since President George W. Bush entered the White House in January 2001. One week after his inauguration, North Korea's UN Ambassadors Li Hyong Chol and Li Gun appeared in Washington, DC seeking talks with the Bush Administration. Topping their wish list was winning Bush Administration affirmation of the Clinton Administration's security assurances. But the envoys were turned away because, according to official US statements, the Bush Administration was reviewing its policy toward North Korea.

Now, almost three years later, Pyongyang appears close to have won similar “security assurances.” For Pyongyang, the most important gain has been focusing international pressure on the United States to give it such assurances. It achieved this victory in October when President Bush, after consulting the leaders of Japan, South Korea and China, agreed to become a party to multilateral security assurances. Along the way, North Korea had to forego its earlier demand that the US give it “legally binding security assurances.” Instead, it now appears willing to settling for even more reliable multilateral assurances backed by its neighbors plus the United States.

President Bush’s concession on security assurances also apparently restored Pyongyang’s self confidence. At the August round, the multilateral consensus against its nuclear ambitions shook Pyongyang’s confidence. Subsequently, because of its restored confidence, Pyongyang opted in mid-October to press for more concessions. Getting Bush to back multilateral assurances was a major gain, but Pyongyang always strives to avoid any appearance of being anxious to get anything.

Get First, Give Last

Another Pyongyang negotiating tactic is to get the other side to reveal its priorities first. Once this has been achieved, it refuses to concede what the other side wants until it has achieved its own goals. Pyongyang realized in mid-October that resumption of the Six Party Talks was crucial for Beijing, Moscow, Seoul and Tokyo. These nations believed that Pyongyang and Washington shared their desire, and would be most concerned about the format and wording for the security assurances. Washington, however, shared Pyongyang’s priority. Both were concerned about format and wording, but even more important were the timing for the exchange of concessions. Washington wisely insisted that Pyongyang first publicly commit itself to the “verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of its nuclear weapons programs” before it could agree to extending security assurances to North Korea.

Pyongyang adamantly rejected the US insistence on “preconditions,” or the “step by step” or sequenced process that Washington favored. Instead, Pyongyang wanted “simultaneous steps.” This concept dates from working level negotiations conducted during the first US-North Korea nuclear negotiations early in 1994. “Simultaneous steps” became a central theme of the first US-North Korean agreement, the now defunct Agreed Framework. The Bush Administration, both because it deeply distrusts North Korea’s leadership and remains intent upon distancing itself from the Clinton Administration’s approaches to North Korea, rejects “simultaneous” steps.

Anxious to resume the Six Party Talks, Beijing and Seoul pushed Pyongyang and Washington to compromise. China’s over anxious diplomatic efforts stumbled badly in this regard when it presented Washington early in December a draft proposal. The Bush Administration promptly termed it “North Korea’s wish list.” Washington’s rejection of the Beijing-Pyongyang proposal embarrassed Beijing. But it also had the simultaneous effect of intensifying Beijing’s frustration with Pyongyang. This eventually convinced

Beijing to tell Pyongyang not to expect any further flexibility in Washington, nor concessions from anyone.

“Coordinated Steps”

At the same time, fortunately for everyone, Japan’s often under rated diplomats intervened. In mid-December, during informal three party discussions in Tokyo with representatives from Seoul and Washington, Japanese diplomats proposed a compromise between “simultaneous steps” and a “step by step process.” Instead, all parties should subscribe to “coordinated steps.” The concept implies that on some occasions, the parties will take “simultaneous” steps, and at other times, “sequenced” steps. In other words, there is sufficient ambiguity to allow both Washington and Pyongyang a face saving way out of their confrontation over timing. If both have accepted this concept, a very significant impediment to the next round of talks has been removed.

If this is true, why was it not possible for the second round to convene as anticipated on or about December 17? It would appear that neither Pyongyang nor Washington wished to appear anxious to resume the talks. More important to both was insuring a clear comprehension of the other side’s adjusted position. This was particularly important in Washington where the Bush Administration’s foreign policy makers remain deeply divided over tactics for dealing with North Korea.

Pyongyang also has its factions, but this probably was not the key reason for its slow agreement to attend another round of Six Party Talks. More likely, Pyongyang has held back its agreement in the hope of winning something additional from Beijing and Seoul, possibly even Washington. Once again, Pyongyang can claim success in this regard. Seoul has promised more investment capital and delivered more chemical fertilizer. China has made similar promises.

Coordinated Diplomacy?

A series of “coordinated steps” appeared to have played out the week of December 22. First the United States let it be known on December 11 that it was considering giving the World Food Program another 60,000 tons of food aid for North Korea (bringing the total for 2003 to 104,000 tons). Then Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, Beijing’s chief delegate to the Six Party Talks, visited Pyongyang December 25-27. The (North) Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that he met with his North Korean counterpart, Kang Sok Ju, first vice minister of foreign affairs. Their “exhaustive exchange of views on the six way talks” concluded with “both sides unanimously” admitting that another round of talks would achieve important progress toward a “negotiated peaceful settlement of the nuclear issue.” Either by “coincident” or because of prior “coordination” between Beijing and Washington, while Wang Yi just happened to be in Pyongyang, the US government confirmed it would give North Korea 60,000 tons of food aid.

Prospects

Recent posturing in Washington and Pyongyang regarding the agenda for the next round of Six Party Talks suggests considerable preparatory work still needs to be completed before the next round can be convened. In Pyongyang, the Foreign Ministry spokesman in a December 28 statement urged that the next round achieve “words-for-words commitments” that remove obstacles to “a package solution on the principle of simultaneous actions.” He cautioned that a major “stumbling block” to further progress is that “the Bush administration is keen to force the DPRK to disarm itself” by scraping “its nuclear weapons program first without showing any will to make a switchover in its hostile policy toward the DPRK.”

In Washington, State Department Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton, a leading so-called hardliner, has reiterated publicly and in off the record interviews that he is determined to have North Korea commit publicly and formally to “the irreversible dismantlement” of all of its nuclear programs prior to the granting of security assurances.

Despite the agreement to convene the second round of Six Party Talks on February 25 in Beijing, several major stumbling blocks remain to be resolved. Foremost is the extent to which Pyongyang will agree to publicly pledge that it will agree to “completely, verifiably, and irreversibly” end its nuclear weapons programs. Washington wants Pyongyang to commit to ending both its plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU) programs. Pyongyang counters that it can only promise to do so regarding its plutonium program since, as it persists in claiming, it does not have an HEU program.

Nevertheless, the clear preference among all the participants is to continue the Six Party Talks. The alternative is the resumption of escalating tensions, which would only renew the highly undesirable risk of war. Further delay is possible, but the cost of more time and patient diplomatic effort are small prices to pay when striving to peacefully halt North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs.

Diplomacy often can achieve much more when conducted quietly, in privacy, rather than at grand gatherings before the international press. Obviously, quiet diplomacy over the past four months has and promises to continue making substantive progress. Washington now talks much less about not giving into “nuclear blackmail,” and more about giving Pyongyang security assurances. At the same time, Pyongyang has made clear its willingness to give up its nuclear ambitions in exchange for a “package solution.” As both sides slowly and hesitantly move toward a possible negotiated settlement, they also are quietly probing one another through intermediaries for the terms upon which to forge a “peaceful diplomatic solution.” This is real progress. Also, it is certainly preferable to a resumption of their acrimonious exchange of threatening rhetoric.