

The Six Party Talks – Frozen or Finished?

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The Six Party Talks are “frozen,” but not yet finished. The participants – China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States – agree that the talks are the best way to achieve a peaceful diplomatic solution to halting the spread of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. After eighteen months, however, a great deal of talk has produced little progress. If the present impasse is to be broken, and the talks are to resume, one or more of the participants is going to have to demonstrate greater flexibility. Otherwise, the talks could soon falter and could eventually collapse.

China’s Endless Hope

China persists in professing its optimism that the talks will soon resume. Almost daily, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman repeats,

... The Chinese side hopes to maintain a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, safeguard peace and stability in this region, resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula through peace talks. ... All the parties have reached a consensus on this issue: all parties will continue to promote the process of peace talks through the Six-Party Talks. ... As to whether the next round of Six Party Talks will be held ..., China’s position is: the earlier, the better.

On November 12, 2004, China’s Foreign Ministry explained after high level consultations with Pyongyang’s representative that, “The DPRK side reiterated that they will unswervingly aim to realize a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, and that the DPRK will continue to resolve the nuclear issue through Six Party Talks.” Wonderful! But if all the parties agree about the talks’ importance and goals, then what is preventing the talks’ resumption?

A Matter of Distrust

Profound distrust between Washington and Pyongyang is the foremost obstacle. North Korea’s Foreign Ministry spokesman reiterated his government’s mistrust of the United States on November 13. He declared, “If the U.S. drops its hostile policy aimed at ‘bringing down the system’ in the DPRK and opts for co-existing with the DPRK in practice, it will be quite possible to settle the (nuclear) issue.”

South Korea and Japan recognize that the main impediment is distrust between Washington and Pyongyang. Seoul and Tokyo are doing their best to assuage

Pyongyang's concerns, but at the same time remain faithful to the Washington's preferences. South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun en route to the November 20 APEC summit in Santiago, Chile publicly urged President Bush to do more to assure North Korea that the United States would respect its sovereignty. Later in Santiago, Prime Minister Koizumi met President Bush and told him about his May 2004 summit in Pyongyang with Kim Jong Il. Koizumi said he emphasized to Kim that North Korea's security was best guaranteed within the framework of the Six Party Talks because of China's and Russia's participation in the talks.

More recently, President Roh in a December 3 press interview cautioned that, "... the more advisable course would be one that would not drive North Korea into a corner." In the same interview, Roh concluded, "Let me assure you that the North Korean nuclear weapons capability will by no means and under no circumstances be tolerated."

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