

The Six Party Talks – Ready to Resume?

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The Six Party Talks are likely to resume in February or March, 2005. China launched the talks with the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and the United States in 2003 hoping to forge a diplomatic resolution of the Korean Peninsula's nuclear problem. After three inconclusive rounds, the talks stalled last July and a fourth round has yet to occur.

Ever since, Washington and Pyongyang have engaged in a diplomatic boxing match. Pyongyang insists it cannot return to the talks until Washington drops its "hostile policy." The Bush Administration adamantly rejects North Korea's allegation.

The participants, including North Korea, agree that the Six Party Talks are the best way to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. This is particularly important to South Korea and Japan. Their national security would be most directly threatened if a hostile North Korea acquired a nuclear arsenal.

The leaders of Japan, China and South Korea confirmed their commitment to the talks at their November 29, 2004 meeting. President George W. Bush reaffirmed a similar commitment when he met these leaders at the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) summit in Chile in November.

Washington's inflexibility since last July seems to have benefited Pyongyang. Beijing and Seoul repeatedly but unsuccessfully urged Washington to be more flexible toward North Korea. Even Japan, intent upon seeing the Six Party Talks resume and hoping to resolve the abduction issue via bilateral negotiations with North Korea, pressed the U.S. to be more flexible.

The Bush Administration, however, has remained adamant that North Korea unilaterally pledge to disarm before US-North Korea bilateral talks and US concessions might be possible. Washington denied North Korean diplomats permission to visit the U.S. capital. U.S. diplomats were ordered not to discuss the nuclear and other bilateral US-DPRK issues with their North Korean counterparts at North Korea's Mission to the United Nations in New York. In mid-October, a U.S. diplomat went to New York to tell DPRK diplomats that the U.S. would not resume food aid to North Korea until further notice.

At the same time, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia coordinated to maintain diplomatic pressure on North Korea. Their goal was to push Pyongyang back to the talks, but without making it feel threatened or isolated. Their efforts seem to have paid dividends. By November, North Korea's preconditions for returning to the talks had shrunk for a long list last July to a single demand.

Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry declared on November 13, "If the U.S. drops its hostile policy aimed at 'bringing down the system' the DPRK, and opts for co-existing with the DPRK in practice, it will be quite possible to settle the (nuclear) issue." Pyongyang's deputy UN representative clarified his government's stance in a private unofficial mid-November meeting in New York. He explained that the U.S. could satisfy North Korea if President Bush made an official public statement that clearly indicated US willingness to pursue peaceful co-existence with the Kim Jong Il government. The North Korean diplomat confirmed this when he met two US diplomats in New York on November 30 and December 3.

The U.S. initially responded positively but hesitantly. The US State Department's Director of Policy Planning in a December 3 statement said "co-existence (with North Korea) remains possible ..." The outgoing US chief negotiator to the Six Party Talks, James Kelly, publicly stated in mid-December that the U.S. seeks North Korea's "transformation," not its overthrow. Kelly also told a South Korean newspaper that the U.S. would be willing to replace the Korean War Armistice with a "multi party peace treaty," a proposal Pyongyang had reiterated in May 2004.

Pyongyang remained unsatisfied. Its leaders reiterated this in their January 1, 2005 Joint New Year Editorial and in a January 8 Foreign Ministry statement. In this latter statement, Pyongyang declared that, "If the U.S. truly wishes a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue, it should rebuild the groundwork of the talks ...and drop its ... hostile policy aimed to 'bringing down the system' in the DPRK and opt for co-existence with it, ..."

Ranking North Korean officials recently asked two visiting U.S. Congressional delegations to tell the Bush Administration that, as evidence that the U.S. has "dropped its hostile policy," Pyongyang wants President Bush to personally, publicly and officially commit the U.S. to peaceful co-existence with North Korea. Thomas Lantos (Democratic, California), a ranking member of the House of Representatives International Affairs Committee, led the first delegation. He met Yang Hyong-sop, the deputy chief of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly, and Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun. Curt Weldon (Republican, Pennsylvania), a member of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, led the second group which included five other Congressmen. They met with Prime Minister Kim Yong-nam and the foreign minister.

Pyongyang's leaders apparently hope that President Bush will make some conciliatory remarks regarding North Korea either in his January 20 inauguration speech or his February 2 State of the Union speech on. President Bush has already said his inauguration speech will focus on "freedom." His State of the Union speech could contain references to peaceful co-existence with North Korea. If it does, the Six Party Talks quite likely would resume soon afterward. The White House on January 14 hinted at its eagerness to resume the Six Party Talks by promoting its chief coordinator of North Korean affairs to the rank of ambassador and giving him the title of "envoy to the Six Party Talks." Nevertheless, from Pyongyang's point of view, the ball is in President Bush's court if the Six Party Talks are to resume soon.