

After the Six Party Talks – What Comes Next?

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Success is relative to the extent one is able to achieve one's goals. Measured by this definition, the Six Party Talks have failed. The talks' six participants initially agreed to pursue a peaceful diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear program. President Bush was particularly adamant about achieving this goal. Japan and South Korea plus China and Russia fully supported this. Even North Korea agreed to pursue a "negotiated" end to its nuclear programs. But Washington, like Pyongyang, had qualifications. Bush ruled out negotiations with North Korea and instead demanded "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of all North Korean nuclear programs. Pyongyang countered that it was willing to consider this, but only if Washington *negotiated*.

The December 2006 round of the Six Party Talks again failed to achieve progress. This most recent meeting in Beijing confirmed that North Korea has no intention of giving up anything unless the United States lifts its financial sanctions and engages it in negotiations. The only tangible gain from the sporadic Six Party Talks has been the prevention of armed confrontation in Northeast Asia.

Failure can be beneficial if we learn from it. Achieving a diplomatic resolution requires diplomacy – the candid exchange of views between adversaries and the formulation of a mutually beneficial package of concessions. President Bush rejected such a strategy. Instead, he preferred coercive tactics that focused international diplomatic and economic pressure on Pyongyang in the hope of compelling it to submit to Washington's will. He and his advisers sought to use China as their hammer to beat Pyongyang into submission. Prime Minister Abe last fall opted to fully support Bush.

Hard line tactics obviously have failed. If anything, they appear to have convinced North Korea to quicken rather than end its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. North Korea today is militarily and economically stronger than when the talks commenced three years ago. Pyongyang has the ability to explode a nuclear weapon. It may be relatively small and its quality dubious, but no one can deny that North Korea now has a nuclear weapons capability. Fortunately, Pyongyang cannot yet deliver its nuclear weapons using ballistic missiles or aircraft. But North Korea is certain to improve its nuclear weapons capability. Another nuclear test is just a matter of time. Also, North Korea will eventually launch a nuclear armed ballistic missile.

The United States and Japan face a choice. They can either learn from the reasons for the Six Party Talks' failure, or intensify their efforts to cause the government in Pyongyang to collapse. Collapse however is not necessarily the optimum solution. A political power vacuum in Pyongyang could create chaos on the Korean Peninsula. If Kim Jong Il abruptly lost control of his government, his generals most likely would establish a new authoritarian government and continue Kim's policies. Competition between the generals, on the other hand, could lead to civil war, and South Korea and China might feel compelled to intervene. On the other hand, striving to force North Korea into submission could end in armed confrontation.

Our best and least costly option would be the alteration of our tactics. Given North Korea's hostility toward us, we must maintain the current potency of our military deterrence capability. This requires presenting Pyongyang with a united diplomatic and military front. Tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, however, have eroded trilateral diplomatic cooperation. Ending these tensions could restore potency to our diplomacy toward Pyongyang. Also deemphasizing coercive tactics would further strengthen the potency of trilateral diplomacy. This requires that Bush and Abe back away from economic sanctions. Such sanctions have proven popular in Japan, but they impede progress toward a diplomatic resolution with Pyongyang.

In short, President Bush and Prime Minister Abe should adjust their priorities regarding North Korea. Either they can improve prospects for a diplomatic resolution by backing away from economic sanctions, or they can sustain sanctions that impede progress without attaining any concrete gains for Washington and Tokyo. Thus far both leaders seem unwilling to make any adjustments. On the contrary, rather than admitting failure, President Bush has merely redefined his goals. Instead of ending North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, he has proclaimed his determination to prevent Pyongyang from exporting its nuclear technology.

Meanwhile, North Korea will continue to refine and enlarge its nuclear arsenal. At the present time, only technology impedes Pyongyang's progress toward this goal. Economic sanctions can prevent it from purchasing the hardware it needs to enhance its nuclear capability. This will only slow the process because sanctions cannot block the flow of weapons technology to North Korea.

We would do well to use the time prior to North Korea's successful building of a nuclear armed ballistic missile to engage Pyongyang in earnest diplomatic dialogue and negotiations. Otherwise, once North Korea has the ability to launch nuclear armed ballistic missiles it will be much more difficult and costly to negotiate a deal. Also, Japan will become North Korea's primary target. Rather than wait for President Bush to adjust his tactics, Prime Minister Abe, for the sake of Japan's national defense, should take the lead and initiate diplomatic overtures toward Pyongyang.