

Talking in Circles in Beijing

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The Six Party Talks are stalled, despite Secretary of State Colin Powell's optimistic claim that the "process is continuing to work." The lack of progress at last week's May 12 to 15 "working level talks" in Beijing does not auger well for progress any time soon toward a "peaceful diplomatic solution" to the second North Korean nuclear crisis. As President Bush cautioned at the talks' February plenary session, he was running out of patience. Vice President Cheney reportedly made a similar comment to China's leadership during his mid-April visit to Beijing. But then expectation of progress escalated when North Korean leader Kim Jong Il unexpectedly showed up on Beijing shortly after Cheney had left town.

The Bush Administration clings to the belief that Beijing's pressure will bring Pyongyang to soften its stance. Soon after Kim Jong Il showed up in Beijing, ranking Bush Administration officials, speaking off the record, resumed chirping Washington's demand for a "Libyan solution" that requires Pyongyang to promise "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) of all of its nuclear programs before any possibility of receiving concessions. These same Bush Administration officials claim that they have Pyongyang caught in a diplomatic vice. They believe that North Korea eventually will submit to China's, and Washington's pressure because Pyongyang cannot afford to risk losing Beijing's economic and diplomatic. Nor can Pyongyang continue to endure, these same officials claim, the harsh economic conditions that US sanctions and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) have imposed on North Korea's inept economy.

Such assumptions, however, have so far proven incorrect. Pyongyang has stood firm. It continues to insist on direct bilateral talks with the U.S. Also, as it did again just before the beginning of last week's working level talks, Pyongyang again urged the U.S. to consider its "reward for freeze" proposal. First tabled last December, Pyongyang has offered to halt its plutonium related nuclear program in exchange for a long litany of economic concessions from the US. Also, it continues to deny that it has a "highly enriched uranium program." So far, Washington has rejected both North Korea's proposal and its denials. Yet Pyongyang persists in asserting that the Six Party Talks "can prove successful only when the U.S. responds to the DPRK's concessions with concessions and returns its magnanimity with magnanimity." Obviously, something has got to give if the stand off is to end peacefully.

As of the end of the mid-May working level talks, Washington's strategy of "not rewarding North Korea for past misdeeds" has accomplished nothing substantial. On the contrary, it has allowed North Korea the time and opportunity to continue developing its

nuclear arsenal free of any international or bilateral constraints. Since the current impasse first developed in 2001, North Korea has greatly expanded its nuclear arsenal. It has also adroitly retained Beijing's and Moscow's diplomatic support, as well as economic assistance from China and South Korea. These developments have negated Washington's assumption of North Korea's imminent economic demise.

Pyongyang's diligent diplomacy also appears to have tempered Tokyo's resolve to support President Bush's adamant stance. In spite of the half century old US-Japan alliance, Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi have pursued different priorities since the fall of 2002. While Bush has focused on "CVID," the Japanese people have compelled their leader to concentrate on resolving the abducted Japanese issue. Koizumi and Kim Jong Il made important progress toward this end at their September 2001 summit in Pyongyang. Ever since, Japan has demanded that North Korea allow five family members of the previously abducted Japanese citizens to join their relatives who now reside in Japan. On the eve of the Six Party Working level talks, Koizumi indicated that an accommodation had been reached when he announced plans to return to Pyongyang on May 22.

At the same time, Pyongyang authorized Ambassador Han Song-ryol, who is stationed in New York but responsible for liaison between Washington and Pyongyang, to propose "direct talks to replace the Korean War Armistice with a peace treaty." The proposal also indicated that, for the first time ever, North Korea would accept South Korea at three party peace talks. The proposal appears to accommodate the long sought and shared goal of Washington and Seoul to jointly engage North Korea in such talks. Undoubtedly, the proposal's timing was aimed at distracting attention away from the Six Party Talks. Another important objective appears to have been to promote Pyongyang's preference for direct, bilateral talks with Washington. At the same time, Pyongyang probably hoped the gesture would entice Seoul to consider shifting, at least temporarily, from the Six Party Talks to three party peace talks. Neither Washington nor Seoul appear eager to react to Pyongyang's proposal.

Nevertheless, the timing of Koizumi's announcement and Pyongyang's peace talks proposal successfully deflected attention away from the working level talks. At the same time, Pyongyang's overtures to Tokyo, Seoul and Washington appear to have blunted any inclination by Beijing to reprimand Pyongyang for not demonstrating some degree of flexibility in the working level talks.

It would appear that Pyongyang, at least for the time being, has successfully stalled the Six Party Talks process. On the one hand, Pyongyang has frustrated both Beijing and Washington's efforts to achieve progress via a vis the Six Party Talks process. On the other hand, Pyongyang's bilateral accommodation of Tokyo and Seoul's priority concerns demonstrates that it is willing to resolve sensitive issues through bilateral diplomacy and the exchange of concessions. As a consequence, Pyongyang has deflected the pressure on it back onto Beijing and Washington.

For Beijing, it now faces a dilemma. Either it can further escalate its pressure on Pyongyang, and risk Pyongyang's disengagement from the talks, or shift its attention to

Washington in an effort to push it toward greater flexibility. Washington faces a dilemma of a very different kind. It can either concede greater flexibility or escalate the pressure on Pyongyang by intensifying implementation of its Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), as vice President Cheney and State Department Under Secretary for International Security Affairs John Bolton have hinted during visits to China earlier this year.

Pyongyang probably believes neither capital wishes a resumption of escalating tensions in Northeast Asia. From the beginning, Beijing has made this clear by convening the Six Party Talks and its emphasis on a peaceful diplomatic solution. Washington's rhetoric has been much brasher, at least until the deterioration of the situation in Iraq. Clearly, given circumstances in Iraq, the Bush Administration cannot now afford, militarily or politically, to risk engaging in another armed clash.

Fortunately for everyone, Pyongyang seems similarly inclined to move cautiously to avoid either angering Beijing or clashing with Washington. Consequently, Pyongyang at the conclusion of the working level talks, directed its delegation to pledge continued participation in the talks. If anything, the Six Party Talks have convinced Pyongyang and Washington that they have more to gain from diplomacy than from confrontation.

In this regard, Secretary Powell's claim that the process is working appears quite appropriate. But, at the same time, the process is stalled. Substantial impediments must still be removed before progress can resume. The ball is clearly in both Washington's and Pyongyang's courts.