

**North Korea's "Maybe" Diplomacy and
the Six Party Talks**

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Whether and when North Korea may return to the stalled Six Party Talks is of intense interest, especially in Beijing, Moscow, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington. China convened the talks two years ago hoping to forge a diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear weapons development program. Since June 2004 there has been no progress, but recently prospects for resumption by mid-summer continue to improve. Otherwise, tensions in Northeast Asia will intensify and could eventually adversely affect the region's dynamic economic activity.

Pyongyang continues to claim that it will return to the negotiations, but only when an "appropriate atmosphere" exists. What this means remains unclear. On June 6, 2005, North Korea's senior diplomats at the United Nations met their U.S. counterparts in a so-called "New York channel" meeting to deliver Pyongyang response to Washington's May 13, 2005 proposal aimed at restarting the Six Party Talks. Pyongyang answer was essentially "maybe" it would rejoin the talks but no date was set.

The Bush Administration's current diplomatic offensive to restart the talks dates from February 2005. North Korea's February 10 announcement that it has nuclear weapons confronted President Bush with three options:

- intensify unilateral diplomatic efforts to induce Pyongyang back to the negotiating table,
- take the issue to the United Nations Security Council to intensify multilateral diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea, or
- prepare for military action against the Kim Jong Il regime.

The Bush Administration opted in April to concentrate on diplomacy. The UN option risks escalating tensions to the edge of war, something Washington wants to avoid, at least for the time being, given the U.S. military's continuing preoccupation with Iraq.

Fearing the eruption of a second Korean War, Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo separately have urged the United States to pursue diplomacy. They are pressing President Bush to demonstrate greater flexibility in his stance toward Pyongyang. For Beijing and Seoul, this means Washington should offer Pyongyang diplomatic and economic inducements to resume talks. Tokyo has taken a harder line. It has moved to impede the flow of Japanese currency to North Korea and the flow of North Korean goods into Japan, while at the same time urging Washington to intensify diplomacy.

In late April, President Bush launched a two prong diplomatic offensive. Ambassador Joseph DeTrani, the State Department's chief coordinator for North Korea policy, concentrated on reopening informal dialogue with North Korea's representatives at the UN. Simultaneously, Ambassador Christopher Hill, the State Department's Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and chief US delegate to the Six Party Talks, tried to convince China to suspend its economic assistance to North Korea in the hope of pressuring North Korea back to the talks. On May 5, China rejected Hill's coercive effort, but on May 7, Pyongyang publicly expressed the hope that its ambassadors to the UN could meet their American counterparts in New York.

A so-called "New York channel" meeting followed on May 13. The author initiated these informal "working level" meetings in 1993 during the first North Korea nuclear crisis. The Bush Administration suspended these meetings in December 2004, explaining that they would not resume until Pyongyang returned to the Six Party Talks. But Bush authorized the May 13 meeting to tell Pyongyang that the US promised to reopen the "New York channel" and engage in direct bilateral diplomatic dialogue, but only if North Korea returned to the Six Party Talks.

The Bush Administration's subsequent public statements confused the situation just as Pyongyang was preparing its response. President Bush accented diplomacy, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice projected a conciliatory posture, but Vice President Chaney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld continued to assert their preference for coercive tactics to deal with North Korea.

Defense Department's moves the week of May 22 were particularly worrisome to Pyongyang. First, the Pentagon claimed its dispatch of fifteen stealth F-117 fighter bombers to South Korea was routine preparation for a major military exercise. North Korea, however, expressed concern because the US had successfully used these aircraft to launch surprise and highly effective attacks against Iraq and Serbia. Then on May 24, Rumsfeld suspended the decade old US Army effort to recover the remains of American soldiers killed and were left in North Korea during the Korean War. Pyongyang considers these recovery missions, which require thirty US soldiers to work in North Korea for six months, to be informal US security assurances because it believes that Washington will not attack while its soldiers are in North Korea.

President Bush moved to reassure North Korea by calling its leader "Mr. Kim Jong II" rather than his usual references to him as a tyrant, etc. Pyongyang promptly noted Bush's politeness, but also urged the US president to restrain his subordinates' debate over his strategy for dealing with North Korea. Meanwhile, Pyongyang quietly agreed to another "New York channel" meeting on June 6. But on June 4, Rumsfeld publicly expressed concerns about the military buildups of China and North Korea. Pyongyang used his remarks to explain its "maybe" answer at the June 6 "New York channel" meeting.

"Maybe" is much better than "no." Prospects continue to improve for the Six Party Talks' resumption soon. China's optimism in this regard is reassuring. But Pyongyang

obviously remains intent upon convincing President Bush to temper his Administration's rhetoric and to demonstrate consistency in its stance toward North Korea.

The more important question now, however, may be whether the Six Party Talks can ultimately forge a peaceful diplomatic resolution. This is South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun primary concern. It is the main reason for his brief June 10 "working" summit with President Bush in Washington. Roh wants Bush to further soften the U.S. preference for North Korea's "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID)" of all of all nuclear programs. In short, even after the Six Party Talks resume, Washington's problems with both North and South Korea will most likely intensify, a subject that we will explore next time.