

Next Steps at the Six Party Talks

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The Six Party Talks process, fortunately for everyone, continues to move slowly toward a diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear program. The Banco Delta Alpha problem is a tangled technical mess that can be resolved by financial experts. Trying to rush its resolution and politicizing the problem will only further complicate and delay its resolution. Slow progress is preferable to the alternative: increasing tensions and possible war. Now is not the time for impatience and a reversion to coercive tactics. On the contrary, the concerned parties should contribute what they can to quickening the pace of progress. There are two things everyone can contribute without cost: patience and understanding.

The United States is, understandably, concerned that Pyongyang has yet to fulfill its obligations in the initial phase of the February 13 Understanding. Specifically, Pyongyang promised to shut down its nuclear reactor and to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to monitor the situation at the Yongbyon nuclear research center. Chief U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill has expressed his concern repeatedly in public statements. According to press reports, the Bush Administration, in a stern message recently delivered to the North Korea mission to the United Nations in New York, has pressed Pyongyang to fulfill its initial phase obligations.

Washington's impatience is perplexing. After all, it took the Bush Administration six years to decide that a diplomatic solution is best achieved using diplomacy. Since January 2007, Washington has repeatedly assured Pyongyang that its funds at Banco Delta Alpha (BDA) were available for withdrawal. The assurances, however, proved premature. Now North Korea is repeatedly reassuring the United States that it will fulfill its initial phase promises, but Washington is demonstrating doubt.

Pyongyang seems to be sending Washington a message: we trusted your assurances, now you should trust our assurances. In other words, Pyongyang's intent appears to be one of using the BDA problem to forge a bilateral process of reciprocity with Washington. Reciprocity is the long respected diplomatic process that requires parties to an international agreement to extend to each other mutual respect, consideration and cooperation. Reciprocity is the foundation of the February 13 accord. The best way to achieve successful reciprocity is that both parties build mutual trust by demonstrating their earnestness through their actions. After all, according to the old adage, "Actions speak louder than words."

Now is the time to look beyond BDA to the next steps necessary for continuing success. There must be clarification as to what Washington expects North Korea to do next. Assistant Secretary Hill on February 22 stated that he expects North Korea to “begin dismantlement” of its nuclear reactor. The February 13 accord, however, indicates that Pyongyang is expected only to “shut down” or “cease operation” of its reactor.

The two processes are very different. The 1994 US-DPRK agreement, required that North Korea initially “freeze” all nuclear activities, then allow IAEA monitoring and, only much later, would North Korea begin to dismantle its nuclear reactor. At the time, the United States government estimated that it would take at least several months to take apart the reactor and ship its pieces to a third country for disposal. Pyongyang is certain to prefer this option. An effort by Washington to quicken the dismantlement process could seriously impede the February 13 accord’s implementation. Obviously, Washington and Pyongyang need to clarify their expectations in bilateral working level talks.

Also, Pyongyang and the IAEA must engage in talks to clarify the precise extent of IAEA activities that North Korea will permit. Prior to the 1994 agreement, more than 46 working level talks, first between the US and North Korea, and then between the IAEA and North Korea, were required to achieve an understanding. At that time, North Korea remained a member of both the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the IAEA. Today, North Korea does not belong to either. It would be unrealistic to expect that the IAEA and Pyongyang will quickly reach agreement on what IAEA inspectors will be able to do once admitted to the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. Further complicating this process will be Washington’s expectations of what it wants the IAEA to do.

Fortunately for all the concerned parties, the initial surge of optimism apparent on February 13 has subsided. The parties now confront reality. Their efforts thus far, while most admirable, are far from successful implementation of a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. This realization will temper expectations, a vital initial step toward success. In other words, the process of achieving a durable peace in Northeast Asia by ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs has finally begun. As they have long said in Korea, “The beginning is half way to the end.”