

US-Japan Pressure and Tokyo-Seoul Tensions Help Pyongyang

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Obviously the Six Party Talks are dead locked. Whether they will resume soon or ever again remains uncertain. Seoul and Beijing will continue their efforts to restart the talks. So far, however, neither Pyongyang nor Washington has shown any willingness to demonstrate the diplomatic flexibility to restart the talks. Also, Seoul-Tokyo tensions are benefiting Pyongyang more than anyone else.

The Bush Administration is convinced that increasing economic pressure on North Korea will eventually force Pyongyang to return to the talks. Prime Minister Koizumi's government shares this view and is also applying increasing economic pressure to Pyongyang. But so far US-Japan collaboration has not accomplished any significant results. Pyongyang remains just as inflexible as it did one month ago when its chief negotiator to the Six Party Talks visited Tokyo.

Actually Pyongyang is skillfully exploiting both the US-Japan collaboration and tensions between Tokyo and Seoul. Several factors are contributing to Pyongyang's success in this regard. Washington and Tokyo assume that North Korea's weak economy make Pyongyang anxious to return to the Six Party Talks so that it can gain Japan's economic assistance and normal commercial relations with the United States in exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Indeed, Pyongyang seems willing to make such a deal, and has proposed one several times. But Pyongyang is not in a rush to do this.

On the contrary, North Korea's main goal now is to delay resumption of the Six Party Talks until it believes that the political situations in Tokyo and Washington are more favorable to it. First of all, there is no reason for Pyongyang to try to make a deal with governments about to undergo transfers of political power. This fall Japan will name a new prime minister and Americans will elect a new Congress. Before taking any steps to return to the negotiating table, Pyongyang wants to see who will lead Japan and whether President Bush will have any political power in the US Congress.

Japan's new prime minister could be Mr. Abe, a so-called "hardliner." He could push for tough demands at the Six Party Talks which Pyongyang could decide to reject. But it

wishes to avoid being blamed for continuation of the talks' deadlock. The best way to do this is not to return to the talks.

At the same time, Pyongyang does not want to make a deal with a weak US president. It believes this is why President Clinton could not get Congressional support for the old Agreed Framework. This fall, if the Democrats win control of the US Congress in the November Congressional elections, President Bush most likely could not convince the Democrats to fund a diplomatic deal with Pyongyang that his administration had negotiated. Any deal that might be hammered out at the Six Party Talks could fall apart quickly because of Democratic party opposition in Washington, D.C. Again, the best strategy for Pyongyang is to wait and see what happens in Tokyo and Washington.

Pyongyang is exploiting the US-Japanese economic sanctions to prolong the deadlock in the Six Party Talks. The consistent policies of Beijing and Seoul are to avoid applying economic pressure to Pyongyang regarding the negotiations. Washington claims its sanctions are not related to the talks. So far, however, the Bush Administration's claims in this regard have not been convincing. As China's leadership made clear at the recent US-China summit in Washington, Beijing believes Pyongyang's claims that Washington is trying to use economic pressure to force North Korea to submit to United States demands at the Six Party Talks. Meanwhile, Seoul continues to reject Washington's pressure to discontinue South Korea's economic cooperation policy toward Pyongyang.

Again, Pyongyang is adroitly playing Beijing and Seoul against Washington and Tokyo. North Korea benefits several ways. It continues to successfully delay resumption of the Six Party Talks, and it does this while also avoiding blame for the deadlock. Instead, it places blame on the US-Japan tactic of applying economic pressure. On the other hand, Pyongyang continues to receive substantial economic assistance and benefit from both Beijing and Seoul. The bottom line is that economic pressure is not likely to compel Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks, certainly not in the near future.

At the same time, Pyongyang is exploiting the continuing tensions between Seoul and Tokyo. South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun seems determined to rally Korean nationalism to himself and his political party by pressing Japan on long standing disputes over claims to Takeshim or Tokto Island, Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine and allegations that Japan intentionally distorts the historical record of its dealings with Korea. North Korea eagerly aligns itself with South Korea on all of these issues. Pyongyang benefits from this situation because Tokyo-Seoul tensions make trilateral cooperation with the United States impossible.

Clearly, without US-Japan economic pressure and Seoul-Tokyo tensions, North Korea's strategy of delaying resumption of the Six Party Talks could not be effective.