

## **The Six Party Talks – On the Edge of Failure?**

**By**

**Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones**

**Former North Korea Affairs Officer**

**U.S. Department of State**

**For**

***Mainichi Shimbun***

**December 2005**

The Six Party Talks, formed to peacefully end North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, could be on the edge of failure. Frustration quickly replaced celebration of the September 19 Joint Statement forged by the six parties at their September 2005 gathering in Beijing. Prospects that the talks might resume in the near future are very bleak. First stalled in September 2004, this time the impasse is much more complex and could even prevent the talk's resumption.

Pyongyang and Washington remain at odds over how to achieve a negotiated settlement. Pyongyang wants substantial economic benefits, including a nuclear light water reactor (LWR), before it will give up its nuclear weapons programs. Washington insists that Pyongyang must first give up all its nuclear weapons programs, both weapons related and peaceful, before any economic benefits can be discussed.

In early October, Washington rejected Pyongyang's demands for an LWR and instead secretly offered to take steps toward the normalization of relations. Chief US negotiator Christopher Hill told North Korea via the "New York Channel" that he would visit Pyongyang to discuss a normalization process, but first North Korea had to "freeze" operation of its 5 Megawatt nuclear reactor at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. Pyongyang refused. Instead it offered to take steps toward rejoining the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) if the United States would promise to give it an LWR. Washington firmly said "no."

No one expected the November round of the Six Party Talks to accomplish progress, but unfortunately the meeting only complicated the situation. Pyongyang's delegation quickly focused on "new" US economic sanctions that Washington imposed in early October. President Bush in June 2005 had authorized the US Department of Treasury to act under Section 311 of the US counter-terrorism Patriot Act and determine which nations were distributing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology and parts. While that investigation continued, the Treasury Department in August arrested a leader of the violently anti-British Irish Republican Art (IRA) and accused him of distributing North Korean made counterfeit "super note" \$100.00 US currency. Both developments convinced the US Treasury Department to block North Korean international banking transactions in US currency.

Pyongyang promptly accused Washington of undermining the September 19 joint statement and pointed to these alleged "new" sanctions as evidence that the United States still maintained a "hostile" policy toward North Korea. Washington responded at a secret

bilateral US-North Korea discussion during the November round of the Six Party Talks. It claimed that the sanctions were not connected to the Six Party Talks, and invited North Korea to send representatives to a “working level briefing” in New York to discuss the “sanctions.” The next day, however, North Korea’s chief delegate Kim Gye Kwan declared publicly that “the DPRK and U.S. had decided to hold bilateral discussions about economic sanctions in New York.”

Washington’s hardliners were outraged. The National Security Council directed State Department officials to clarify to their North Korean counterparts that “bilateral negotiations about economic sanctions” were impossible. Later, a member of the National Security Council, speaking off the record, confirmed that Ambassador Hill had actually invited Kim Gye Kwan to New York to attend the briefing, but that the National Security Council had refused to issue a visa for him.

Instead, Pyongyang was asked to send “working level” officials to a “briefing” with “US police authorities” in New York. North Korean Foreign Ministry Director General for North America Affairs Li Gun plus two or three other “working” officials were invited, but not Kim Gye Kwan. As a face saving device, the State Department arranged for academic groups in New York and at Stanford University to invite Kim Gye Kwan to “track two” seminars. Pyongyang rejected this arrangement. It quietly declared that it would not return to the Six Party Talks until the US government invited Kim Gye Kwan to meet Christopher Hill in New York for a “bilateral discussion of economic sanctions.”

But before bruised egos in Pyongyang could heal and tempers cool in Washington, the US ambassador to South Korea labeled North Korea a “criminal regime.” Washington scrambled to marginalize the comments’ impact in Pyongyang, but the damage had been done. Pyongyang’s “hardliners” seized on the comments as evidence that the United States still pursues a “two face hostile policy” toward North Korea.

Next Seoul moved to save the Six Party Talks from another prolonged stalemate. It invited the Six Party Talks’ participating nations to send their chief delegates to Cheju Island for an “informal” meeting on December 19, immediately after South and North Korea had held ministerial talks on the island. Washington considered sending its delegate, but only if North Korea also did so. Pyongyang rejected the invitation and the idea of an informal meeting collapsed.

Seoul then dispatched its Unification Minister to Washington to discuss another informal meeting in January. The Bush Administration, preoccupied with Iraq and domestic issues, reacted coolly to the visit. Even before the minister had arrived in Washington, the Bush Administration had flatly rejected the idea of another “informal round” of the Six Party Talks. Secretary of State Rice spent only 15 minutes with the South Korean visitor. At the National Security Council, chief adviser Stephen Hadley, a staunch “hardliner,” urged Seoul to get tougher with Pyongyang and to tighten its economic pressure on North Korea.

The Six Party Talks clearly appear on the edge of collapse. The frustrated expectations that followed the September 19 joint statement clearly have returned control of tactics to hardliners in Pyongyang and Washington. It is even possible that the ranks of “hardliners” have grown in both capitals.

Pyongyang appears confident that it can endure another period of escalating tensions. It can rely on Beijing and Seoul to supply its most critical economic needs, including food and investment for its economic revitalization. Meanwhile, Pyongyang no longer seems intimidated by the Bush Administration’s “other option,” possible military action. US military forces remain preoccupied with the war on terrorism, particularly in Iraq. More importantly, Pyongyang claims that it has a “nuclear deterrent capability” to counter Washington’s military might, something Pyongyang apparently lacked during the first stalemate in the Six Party Talks.

Pyongyang’s refusal to comply with the Bush Administration’s stance has already intensified Washington’s frustration with North Korea and the Six Party Talks lack of progress. The greater Washington’s impatience with Pyongyang, the more prone it will be to intensify economic and diplomatic pressure on it. At the same time, Seoul’s reluctance to restrain its “economic cooperation” with North Korea will also increase the strain on US-ROK relations.

For the present time, the outcome of the current impasse remains uncertain except for the fact that tensions are destined to increase in Northeast Asia well into the New Year. The Six Party Talks have not failed, yet, but they are in serious trouble.