

## **The Six Party Talks – Going in Circles**

**By**

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Today we are no closer to a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. Nearly three years have passed since China gathered its diplomatic representatives together with those from Moscow, Pyongyang, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington in Beijing to forge a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions. Everyone quickly agreed on a common goal – a nuclear free Korean Peninsula. Ever since, a combination of bickering between the United States and North Korea, on the one hand, and patient persistence by the other participants, on the other hand, has characterized the talks.

Undeniably, the talks have not been entirely futile. Peace in the region has persisted because diplomacy thus far has restrained tensions and prevailed over confrontation. Propelling this preference for peace is the shared goal of continuing the region's impressive prosperity and economic dynamism.

Even North Korea, the poorest of the region's nations, seems more intent upon joining this prosperity than threatening to disrupt it, a fairly new trend in Pyongyang's approach to its neighbors. For several years now, Pyongyang's leaders have put national reconciliation and peaceful co-existence before national unification. Even while maintaining an awesome conventional military force and developing a nuclear capability, Pyongyang has redefined its goals. For at least a decade it has stopped threatening to militarily overwhelm South Korea. Instead, since at least 2000, it has accented economic revitalization of its economy and turned to South Korea and China for assistance.

Internationally, North Korea since 1995 has hesitantly but steadily opened itself to the outside world. Famine in 1995 compelled this change. But even though the need for food aid has subsided, Pyongyang continues to engage the international community on an unprecedented scale. Since joining the United Nations together with South Korea in 1992, North Korea has normalized relations with most nations in Europe and many in Southeast Asia and South America. The number of foreigners living and working inside North Korea continues to grow. Particularly impressive is the explosion since 2000 in the number of South Koreans visiting North Korea. Even foreign tourists are being welcomed in increasing numbers. This year, even Americans can obtain tourist visas.

Economically, Pyongyang's leaders are pursuing a systemic reform of their economy, a possibility thought impossible only two or three years ago. North Korea is striving to preserve its fundamentally socialist system by adapting old ways to new ones learned from China, South Korea, Europe and elsewhere. The process requires impressive pragmatism and ideological flexibility. Nevertheless, North Korea remains an impoverished nation where the needs of its civilian economic sector remain squeezed and subordinated to the demands of its formidable military establishment. Prosperity will continue to elude North Korea so long as it pursues a "Military First" policy of favoring the military over the civilian sectors of its economy and society.

The primary task of the Six Party Talks is to correct this imbalance. The participants must convince North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons programs in favor of increasing the nation's ability to produce goods that are competitive in the international market. Only then can the government in Pyongyang fulfill the basic needs of its people. In other words, forging a peaceful resolution to the Korean Peninsula's nuclear woes will require more than merely disarming North Korea. It will mean modernizing and re-orienting North Korea's economy.

But the Six Party Talks continue to go in circles. Repeatedly, the participants have forged a consensus on goals only to resume their bickering over how best to achieve these goals. We are now in yet another cycle of bickering. First came the consensus in September 2005 in the form of the Six Party Talks' Joint Statement. Within a matter of days, however, the bickering resumed. Pyongyang demanded that the United States provide it a modern nuclear light water reactor (LWR) as part of the price for agreeing to Washington's demand that North Korea "completely, verifiably, irreversibly dismantle" (CVID) all of its nuclear program. Pyongyang promptly rejected this.

The two sides ever since have squabbled over relatively minor issues. In October 2005, the issue was the pre-conditions for chief US negotiator Christopher Hill's visit to Pyongyang. Pyongyang accepted two of three conditions. It said that Hill could travel directly from Seoul to Pyongyang via Pongmujom. Also acceptable was for U.S. Coordinator on North Korea Human Rights Ambassador Jeffery Lofkowitz to accompany Hill. But Pyongyang drew the line when Washington demanded that North Korea shut down its 5 megawatt reactor at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center.

Next came a dispute over new U.S.-imposed economic sanctions. For many years, North Korea is known to have distributed counterfeit U.S. currency (so-called "super notes"), counterfeit cigarettes and other international contraband. In June 2006, President Bush authorized the U.S. Department of Treasury to gather evidence of these illegal activities. In September, President Bush determined that the evidence merited his authorization of Patriot Act Section 311 sanctions being imposed on a Chinese-operated bank in Macau which handles many of North Korea's international financial transactions. This action coincided with issuance of the Six Party Talks' September Joint Statement.

North Korea promptly reacted very negatively to the imposition of these new sanctions. Its foreign ministry alleged that the US act was inconsistent with the wording and intent

of the Six Party Talks' Joint Statement. Pyongyang alleged that the sanctions were designed to pressure it into giving up its demands for a light water reactor, but it did not yet threaten to pull out of the talks.

Tensions soon escalated after diplomats from Washington and Pyongyang met briefly at the short November session of the Six Party Talks. The facts remain unclear as to what happened, but an unfortunate misunderstanding developed which has since delayed the talks' resumption. It is certain that the US side invited North Korea to send a "working level" delegation to New York for a "briefing" regarding the new US section 311 sanctions. But North Korea's chief negotiator Vice Foreign Ministry Kim Gye Kwan, for reasons still unclear, declared to the press that the US had invited him and his officials to New York to "discuss" economic sanctions. Kim's announcement caught his US counterpart Ambassador Hill by surprise. It also angered Washington's hardliners and aroused their suspicions about how much flexibility they could entrust to Hill.

By early December, a serious impasse had developed over issues unrelated to the Six Party Talks. Even more worrisome was how to overcome this impasse. Ambassador Hill had lost the confidence of Washington's hardliners, specifically Vice President Chaney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, National Security Council director Stephen Hadley and State Department Under Secretary for International Security Affairs Robert Joseph. North Korea then announced that it would not return to the Six Party Talks until the United States had rectified the situation by lifting the Section 311 sanctions on the Alpha Delta Bank in Macau and issue a visa to its vice minister of foreign affairs to visit the United States.

A series of efforts by the State Department, and the Foreign Ministries in Seoul and Pyongyang failed to break the impasse in December and January 2006. First US and North Korean diplomats worked to forge a face saving compromise. North Korea would send a "working level" delegation to New York for the "briefing" on the Section 311 sanctions, but only if Washington issued a visa for North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Kwan to attend an academic "track II" meeting in the US. The deal collapsed, however, when the National Security Council refused to authorize issuance of the visa for Kim. South Korea then attempted to host an "informal" gathering of the Six Party Talks chief negotiators in Cheju Island on December 19, 2005. Seoul's aim was to provide a forum for the US and North Korean chief negotiators to meet face to face to overcome their differences. But neither Washington nor Pyongyang accepted the invitation. A second effort at a different location and time also failed.

Ambassador Hill remained intent upon demonstrating to his North Korean counterpart regret that the US government had denied Kim Gye Kwan a visa. Hill also remained earnest in his desire to resolve differences through face to face diplomatic dialogue. Finally, in mid-January 2006, with China's assistance, Hill and Kim were able to meet briefly in Beijing. But first Hill had to travel all the way to Beijing to request that China arrange the meeting. When North Korea did not respond quickly, Hill was compelled to depart Beijing and to resume his tour of East Asia. Only after he had travel to Southeast Asia did Kim Gye Kwan agree to meet Hill in Beijing. This compelled Hill to

demonstrate his sincerity by returning to Beijing. Even then, the meeting proved inconclusive.

Efforts continue by both sides to dismantle the impasses that formed in October and November 2006. It is important to note that the causes for these impediments are not directly related to the Six Party Talks. The problems are rooted more in inexperience on the United States side, and concerns about national and individual pride rather than more fundamental concerns.

On the US side, Ambassador Hill misjudged the extent of his support in Washington, D.C. His efforts to gain Washington's support for the September Joint Statement rallied hard line opposition in Washington against him and the statement. Then Washington's hardliners seized the initiative to impose sanctions on North Korea. This was more a consequence of their arrogance than a need to take prompt action against Pyongyang's illegal activities. After all, North Korea for years has either condoned or facilitated such activities. Further complicating the situation was the US Ambassador to Seoul's allegation that North Korea is a "criminal state." Such candid but certainly undiplomatic rhetoric only further obstructed progress toward the resumption of the Six Party Talks.

Nor has North Korea been merely a victim of US diplomatic clumsiness and arrogance. It too has its "hard line" faction and they undoubtedly have seized on US missteps to obstruct their nation's return to the Six Party Talks. Their insistence on bellicose rhetoric and preconditions only further impede diplomacy. As of mid-February, 2006, Pyongyang "hard liners" continue to insist that the US imposed the Section 311 sanctions on North Korea in an effort to force it to give up its demand for a light water reaction. Clearly, the primary motive for their claim is intense distrust of the United States.

Fortunately for all the concerned nations, quiet diplomacy seems destined to dismantle the current impasse. Eventually, the Six Party Talks appeared destined to resume, possibly as early as March. But this is not necessarily cause for celebration.

Formidable impediments must still be overcome if the talks are to achieve a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear ambitions. It is now apparent that there are powerful officials in both Washington and Pyongyang who do not necessarily favor a peaceful diplomatic settlement. For those in Washington, the ultimate goal is the end of the Kim Jong Il regime. In Pyongyang, on the other hand, the goal is to preserve the regime by preserving its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.

But even the moderates in both capitals must also share responsibility for the slow and uncertain progress of the Six Party Talks. Moderates in Washington and Pyongyang appear agreed that there must be a peaceful diplomatic resolution. But they remain at odds over how to forge an accord. Pyongyang continues to demand much more than Washington is willing to pay for a negotiated deal.

Meanwhile, Beijing, Seoul, Moscow, and to a lesser degree Tokyo, agree that the problem is best resolved by first forging a consensus on priorities. They also agree that

the first priority must be the preservation of peace by achieving a peaceful diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Concerns about the economic price are of secondary concern. But Washington continues to adamantly reject this view. Instead, it refuses to give North Korea anything until North Korea has given up all of its nuclear programs, military and civilian. Given this gap between Washington's preferences and those of the other Six Party Talks' participants, prospects for progress toward a diplomatic solution will remain hesitant at best into the foreseeable future. Ultimately, the talk's success or failure will hinge of the extent to which Washington and Pyongyang are willing to meet each other half way relative to their current expectations. Otherwise, the talks will fail, which could produce a volatile escalation of tensions in Northeast Asia.