

The Six Party Talks – Will They Resume?

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April 2006

Neither the early April gathering of diplomats in Tokyo nor the US-China summit have improved prospects for prompt resumption of the Six Party Talks. Both events aroused great interest and hope that there might be progress toward a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear program. If anything, Washington and Pyongyang have decided that there is no benefit in returning to promptly resuming the talks. Even the intense diplomatic efforts of Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing during the gathering of diplomats in Tokyo the week of April 10 did not improve the situation. North Korea's high powered diplomatic delegation met four times with their Japanese counterparts, twice with their South Korean colleagues and once with a visit Chinese delegate. But there was no bilateral meeting between the United States and North Korea. Consequently, the situation in Northeast Asia could become increasingly tense in the near future.

Track II and summit meetings cannot break the impasse between Washington and Pyongyang. The only solution is either a compromise between the two adversaries, or for one side to give up. Washington is confident that concentrating economic and diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang will force it to submit to US demands. North Korea, however, is equally determined not to bow to the USA.

Washington continues its dual stance. On the one hand, it demands that Pyongyang return to the Six Party Talks, but at the same time, it refuses to hold bilateral meetings with North Korea. Washington rejects Pyongyang's claim that there is no connection between the economic sanctions it imposed on North Korea in September 2005 and Pyongyang's position at the Six Party Talks. Pyongyang refuses to return to the talks until the USA removes these sanctions.

At the September 2005 Six Party talks, Pyongyang claimed that it will give up its nuclear weapon's program, but wished to continue its "peaceful" nuclear energy program. It has repeatedly vowed to return to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), to rejoin the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to allow inspections of its nuclear facilities. In exchange, however, it wants the United States to normalize diplomatic and economic relations, drop all sanctions against it and provide North Korea a light water nuclear reactor (LWR).

Washington has answered, "No deal!" Instead it demands that North Korea first give up all nuclear programs, both military and civilian. At the same time, the United States

imposed new economic sanctions on North Korea citing its continuing involvement in “the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.” Also the United States asserts that the Pyongyang government is responsible for North Korea’s involvement in numerous illegal activities such as the printing and distribution of counterfeit U.S. currency and drugs. These new sanctions have effectively disrupted North Korea’s international banking transactions and are impeding its trade with other nations.

Pyongyang’s diplomats at an early March 2006 meeting in New York with U.S. Treasury Department officials offered a “mutually face saving” solution. Pyongyang announced that it “officially recognizes the United States’ right to protect its currency.” But at the same time, Pyongyang rejected Washington’s allegation that the North Korean government is behind all the illegal activities. Instead, Pyongyang offered to engage in bilateral “working level” discussions to jointly develop measures to end the illegal activities.

Again Washington said, “No deal!” It counter demanded that Pyongyang:

- publicly admit responsibility for the illegal activities,
- immediately take steps to investigate and punish the responsible parties,
- promptly agree to return to the Six Party Talks.

Pyongyang’s reaction was quite predictable. It reaffirmed its determination not to return to the Six Party Talks until the United States had dropped all of its new sanctions.

The Bush Administration waited until the end of March before taking further action. It had hoped that Pyongyang would soften its stance after the New York meeting. Once again, however, the Bush Administration underestimated Pyongyang’s resolve. If anything, Pyongyang has stiffened its determination not to return to the Six Party Talks until Washington demonstrates some flexibility.

A well placed official in the Bush Administration told me at the end of March that the White House had decided that returning to the Six Party Talks would be futile. Finally, the Bush Administration has a consensus regarding how to deal with North Korea. All the key policy makers agree that it would be useless to continue efforts to negotiate an end to North Korea’s nuclear programs. In other words, Secretary Rice now agrees with Vice President Chaney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Council chief Hadley. Their new consensus shifts the emphasis from diplomacy at the Six Party Talks to intensification of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) using economic pressure. At the same time, President Bush continues to hold open the possibility of using “other options,” a position he confirmed with his recent affirmation of his “pre-emptive counter-proliferation” strategy.

Washington’s new consensus appears to have merely convinced Pyongyang’s “hardliners” that it must keep its “nuclear deterrence capability” to defend against Bush’s “pre-emptive” strategy.

In short, Washington and Pyongyang have convinced one another not to return to the Six Party Talks. In Washington’s eyes, if Pyongyang will not halt its illegal activities and

respect international law, then it cannot be trusted to fulfill the terms of a diplomatic agreement forged at the Six Party Talks. This is the link between Washington's economic sanctions and the talks. Pyongyang is similarly convinced that it must have a nuclear weapons capability to protect itself against Washington's hostile policies, i.e. Proliferation Security Initiative and President Bush's pre-emptive military option which he reconfirmed in late March.

Seoul and Beijing can be expected to intensify their diplomatic efforts to restart the Six Party Talks. Meanwhile, Tokyo and Moscow wait on the sidelines hoping the situation will improve. Pyongyang may try to improve relations with Tokyo in the hope that Tokyo will then pressure Washington to be more flexible toward Pyongyang. The fact remains, however, that hardliners now dominate policy in Washington and Pyongyang. Until "moderates" reassert their influence, the Six Party Talks are destined to remain suspended. Meanwhile, the longer it takes to restart these talks, the greater will be the escalation of tension in Northeast Asia because of uncertainty about the situation on the Korean Peninsula.