Policy Forum 04-26A: Six-Party Talks: Round 3


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Six-Party Talks: Round 3

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by B. C. Koh

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I. Introduction

The following is a paper presented by B. C. Koh, Director of the Institute for Far-Eastern Studies. In

this paper Mr. Koh argues that the change in both the US and the DPRK's position at the workshop was a repositioning, not a softening, of each countries stance. The United States is still looking for CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling) even if it is not using that specific term. The DPRK is likewise still unwilling to acknowledge the existence of a HEU or compromise on the distinction between a peaceful and a military nuclear program.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by B. C. Koh

"Six-Party Talks: Round 3"
by B. C. Koh

The third round of six-party talks, held in Beijing from June 23 to 26, not only helped to keep the process alive but also made modest progress toward the distant goal of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. The biggest difference between this round and its two predecessors pertains to a softening of U.S. position. For the first time since the multilateral process began in August 2003 the U.S. put forth a proposal spelling out what North Korea would need to do in the short run and what it would get in return. The North, too, was a little more specific than in the past in delineating what it calls a "reward for freeze" formula.

What occurred nonetheless could be construed as tactical adjustment rather than strategic change. The basic positions of the two main protagonists remained poles apart and, perhaps, irreconcilable. Washington merely refrained from using the term, CVID (a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling of the North's nuclear programs); it did not by any means abandon, let alone, modify the goal. Nor did Pyongyang retreat from its previous position on two key issues: the suspected program to produce nuclear weapons utilizing highly enriched uranium (HEU) and the differentiation of nuclear weapons development and non-military nuclear programs. It continued to deny the existence of an HEU-based nuclear weapons program, while insisting on the right to pursue a nuclear program for peaceful purposes.

Change in U.S. Position

Even before talks officially began at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on June 23, there were indications that the U.S. might display more flexibility this time than it had in the two preceding rounds. On June 21, when working-level talks got under way in Beijing, Secretary of State Colin Powell said in Washington that "we will enter these talks as we have entered previous talks: with flexibility and with an attitude of trying to resolve this problem." Although these remarks did not necessarily reveal any change, The Washington Post reported that the "United States and its negotiating partners are working on a plan to offer economic aid jointly to North Korea if it agrees to end its nuclear weapons program." "The aim would be to pump life into six-nation negotiations that have made little headway since opening last August in China."

In an article dated June 22, The New York Times reported that President Bush had authorized American negotiators to offer the North "a new but highly conditional set of incentives to give up its nuclear weapons program the way Libya did late last year." Noting that it "would be the first significant, detailed overture to North Korea since Mr. Bush took office three years ago," the paper then went on to elaborate on the proposal.

What, then, did James A. Kelly, the chief U.S. negotiator, actually offer the North in Beijing on June 23? North Korea would be required to (1) "fully disclose its nuclear activities," (2) "submit to inspections," and (3) "pledge to begin eliminating nuclear programs after a 'preparatory period' of three months." In return for all this, the North "would receive shipments of heavy fuel oil to meet its energy needs, gain a 'provisional security guarantee' from the United States and see the lifting of some sanctions

In what sense did the U.S. proposal represent a departure from its previous stance? As unnamed U.S. officials put it, the proposal is "more tangible and more specific" than any offered in the past. In the past, in fact, the Bush administration had adamantly refused to spell out benefits Pyongyang would receive on grounds that "providing any benefits to North Korea before it completely abandoned its nuclear program would be like submitting to blackmail."

Another tactical change the U.S. made was to stop using the term CVID. Recognizing that "the repetition of that demand and the suggestion that North Korea had to give up its nuclear program before it could expect benefits had inflamed sensibilities at earlier rounds," the U.S. agreed with its allies, South Korea and Japan, that avoiding CVID would be prudent. That does not mean, however, that Washington has scaled down its goal of complete denuclearization. For it has made clear that the North must freeze and then dismantle all of its nuclear programs, including the HEU-based program.

A number of considerations help explain change in the Bush administration's stance. Up to now, it had been "caught between two conflicting approaches." "One camp, encompassing many in the Pentagon and Vice President Cheney's office, has argued for further isolating North Korea's government and pressing for its collapse. Another, rooted in the State Department and some corners of the National Security Council, has said that Kim Jong Il...should be put to the test, given a serious offer that lays out what kind of benefits would flow if he gave up an expanding nuclear program. For now, that camp has won the day."

Of the key factors that helped to shape Bush's decision, "alliance management" may have been pivotal. It is well known that South Korea has consistently favored an approach that is a bit more flexible than the U.S.'s. At the second round of six-party talks four months earlier, South Korea had proposed its own version of "reward for freeze"--a proposal to provide energy assistance to the North on condition that the North commits itself to freezing its nuclear facilities as a first step toward their eventual dismantling. Although Russia and China had offered to join Seoul in providing the assistance, the U.S. and Japan merely expressed their "understanding and support," while making it plain that they would not join in the scheme.

Since Koizumi's second summit meeting with Kim Jong Il in May, however, Japan has changed its policy of unstinting support for U.S. stance on the North Korean nuclear issue. Tokyo joined Seoul in pressing for a softening of Washington's posture. In the words of a senior U.S. government official, "our allies [meaning South Korea and Japan] have been telling us that they think Kim Jong Il is ready for a test of his intentions…So we are prepared to offer them a strategic choice." As another senior official said, "They may say no--and in that case they will have failed the test." After the third round began in Beijing, Japan announced "its readiness to join other countries providing energy aid to North Korea on the condition that Pyongyang freezes its nuclear program, provides information on the programs and allows verification of the freeze."

China, for whose invaluable help in setting up and hosting six party talks the U.S. has expressed gratitude, has also been a persistent advocate of a more flexible approach, and must have played a role in inducing change in U.S. policy. Other key considerations were the absence of any viable options in the face of the Iraq situation and domestic electoral politics in the U.S.

Stretched to its limit in Iraq--and in Afghanistan--the Bush administration did not really have the capability to pursue non-diplomatic options vis-a-vis the North. Economic sanctions and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), to be sure, were in the repertory of potentially available options but their efficacy and, in the case of sanctions, feasibility, were problematic. Bush's senior advisers "acknowledge that there are no good military options if North Korea chooses to keep making weapons--only threats of more of the isolation the country has suffered but survived for half a century."

In the domestic arena "Senator John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee, was beginning to charge that Mr. Bush had made America significantly less safe by ignoring the growing North Korean arsenal while it was focused on Iraq." Even after Bush made his offer to the North, his critics argued that he had waited far too long to make his offer. Kerry, for example, "argues that it should have happened early in 2001, and others say right after the American invasion of Iraq. Hawks inside the administration believe it is still too early."

North Korean Response

North Korea's chief delegate, Kim Kye Gwan, reiterated the "reward for freeze" proposal, specifying what both would entail. As for freeze, Kim made clear that his country would be ready to freeze all plutonium-related facilities, including the five-megawatt graphite-moderated reactor and reprocessing facility in Yongbyon; the North would also "refrain from producing more nuclear weapons, transferring and testing them." The freeze, moreover, would be the first step toward the "ultimate dismantlement of [the North's] nuclear weapons program. The duration of the freeze, however, would hinge on the kinds and duration of "reward" the U.S. would offer.

In regard to reward, Kim demanded a "U.S. commitment to the lifting of sanctions and blockade against the DPRK and the energy assistance of 2,000 kilowatt through the supply of heavy fuel oil and electricity." The North specifically wants the U.S. to remove the DPRK from Washington's list of state sponsors of terrorism. The amount of energy assistance Pyongyang demands would be the same as the total quantity of electricity that would be generated by the two light-water reactors the U.S. agreed to supply, with Seoul and Tokyo paying the bill, to the North under the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework.

What did the North think of the change in the U.S. stance? In the words of the DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesman, positive aspects of U.S. behavior included the following:" This time the U.S. side said that it would take note of the DPRK's proposal for 'reward for freeze' and seriously examine it." "It was fortunate," he added, "that the U.S. did not use the expression, CVID, but accepted the principle of "words for words" and "action for action" as proposed by the DPRK." "A scrutiny of the U.S. proposal suggests, to our regret, that [the U.S. is actually intent] on disarming the DPRK." The spokesman assailed the U.S. proposal for a "preparatory period" of three months for full disclosure of nuclear programs, submission to inspections, and start of the work to eliminate nuclear programs. He pointed out that the persistence of mutual mistrust and misunderstanding had prevented a breakthrough. He called on the U.S. to drop "its unreasonable assertion about an enriched uranium program and the like" and to renounce its "hostile policy toward the DPRK."

It should be noted that during his 2 ½-hour private discussion with Kelly on June 24, Kim Kye Gwan said that the North "would test a nuclear weapon unless Washington accepted Pyongyang's proposal for a freeze on its atomic program." "Kelly told Kim that there was little trust in Washington for North Korea and that Kim's statements wouldn't improve matters." This, however, was not the first time that a North Korean diplomat had made such a threat--a similar threat was made by Li Gun, the

North's chief delegate to three-party talks, in Beijing in April 2003. Hence the U.S. did not take it seriously.

An Assessment

In the end, the only real agreement that was reached sounded like a broken record: an agreement to meet again. According to a chairman's statement issued on the final day of the talks, "the parties agree in principle to hold the fourth round of the six-party talks in Beijing by the end of September 2004, at a date to be decided through diplomatic channels with due consideration to the proceedings of the working group. The parties authorized the working group to convene at the earliest possible date to define the scope, duration and verification as well as corresponding measures for first steps for denuclearization, and as appropriate, make recommendations to the fourth round of the talks."

The only thing that is reasonably certain, then, is that six-party talks will continue. Unless and until the two main protagonists make further concessions, however, the prospects for a settlement are dim. The biggest stumbling blocks remain the North's refusal to acknowledge the existence of an HEU program and its insistence that it will not give up a non-military nuclear program. Both sides may well be playing the waiting game--to see what happens in the November presidential election in the U.S.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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