


Drifting into the Six Party Talks?

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By Peter Hayes and Scott Bruce

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute, and Scott Bruce, the Nautilus Fellow at the University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim, wrote: "In short, bad intentions and bad faith can only breed further mistrust, accelerate nuclear proliferation in the region, and extend the frozen cold war in Korea indefinitely into the future. The DPRK case shows once again that strategic drift is not substitute for realistic policy when it comes to nuclear weapons."

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 Peter Hayes and Scott Bruce

- Drifting into the Six Party Talks?
by Peter Hayes and Scott Bruce

Will the next round of Six Party Talks on the DPRK nuclear issue prove to be the reef on which US leadership in East Asia founders? Or will it launch a new, US-led multilateral security architecture for the whole region that steers Korea back into safer waters?

The talks are meant to lead to coordinated action by five powers to resolve the nuclear threat posed by the sixth, North Korea. To date, however, the talks have achieved nothing followed by long interludes of slow motion faux diplomacy while the DPRK makes more nuclear weapons. In short, the White House aimed to avoid catastrophic failure, not to achieve success.

The talks are not resuming because anyone seriously expects a breakthrough that returns the Peninsula to its non-nuclear path. Rather, the United States and North Korea are maneuvering to assign blame on the other for the likely impasse that will follow the talks in the eyes of the other four powers, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea.

Why now? Because the DPRK cannot afford to alienate China to the point that Beijing abandons the North. The DPRK never responded to the American open-ended offer to put everything on the table at the last round, in June 2004. Thus, it has been obvious for months that the DPRK would turn up, if only to pour cold water on American proposals and to demonstrate that the White House is actually not willing to negotiate the insecurities between the DPRK and the United States.

The DPRK has agreed to this new round of talk for three reasons. First, it can extract concessions from the ROK and PRC just by showing up. On July 11th, the ROK agreed to provide 500,000 tons of rice to the North. The ROK has also agreed to expand its economic cooperation with the DPRK through the Kaesong industrial project, the cross-border Railroad, and will consider potential cooperation over commercial fishing. If the DPRK takes steps to dismantle its nuclear weapons the ROK has proposed to supply the DPRK with 2 gigawatts of electric power to substitute for the suspended KEDO light water reactor project and pledged to push the other powers to re-establish shipments of heavy fuel oil to the DPRK which were suspended in 2002.

Second, it enables the DPRK to buy more time both to make nuclear weapons and to outwait the Bush Administration. From Kim Jong Il's perspective, every day that passes is a day closer to the time when George W. Bush leaves office.

Finally the DPRK wants to demonstrate that the United States is only going through the motions when it comes to the six party talks. By coming back to the negotiating table the DPRK puts the onus to resolve the talks back on the United States and focuses attention on the US proposal, which has been criticized by the PRC and ROK for not offering any enticements to the DPRK for taking steps toward curtailing its nuclear program.

For its part, the Bush White House seeks to demonstrate that the DPRK will not comply with any reasonable deal made at the Six Party Talks. This outcome will allow the US to push its alternative strategy of regime change by further isolating the DPRK and squeezing it into oblivion. The White House hopes that this pressure will cause the regime to collapse, removing the problem without

relying on a costly military action.

The United States proposes that the DPRK come clean, disarm, submit to inspection and wait for an unspecified amount of aid to follow. The DPRK is about as likely to accept this proposal as the United States is inclined to bless the DPRK as a legitimate nuclear power.

Such faux diplomacy leaves the ROK, Russia, and the PRC no option but to cut their own deals with the DPRK as the alternative—a collapse with possible border instability and war in the Peninsula—would be catastrophic. In short, bad intentions and bad faith can only breed further mistrust, accelerate nuclear proliferation in the region, and extend the frozen cold war in Korea indefinitely into the future. The DPRK case shows once again that strategic drift is not substitute for realistic policy when it comes to nuclear weapons.

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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