

Policy Forum 05-67A: North Korea Six Party Talks: The Bad News May Actually Be the Good News



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By Karin J. Lee

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I. Introduction

Karin J. Lee, Senior Fellow at the East Asia Policy Education Project of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, writes: "In the midst of round four, the six party process is finally off to a good start - but there is a long way to go. At an August 7th Press Conference, Assistant Secretary Hill reiterated his commitment to continue direct talks with North Korea during the recess. Such an approach will go a long way toward whittling away at the divisive issues and may result in more good news."

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II. Report by Karin J. Lee

- North Korea Six Party Talks: The Bad News May Actually Be the Good News
by Karin J. Lee

The bad news: after a year with no talks at all, the fourth round of six party talks, held from July 26th through August 7th, recessed after failing to resolve seemingly intractable issues. The good news: after a year of not talking to one another, the six parties are finally discussing the seemingly intractable issues.

It is no surprise that the differences between the United States and North Korea which have long been barriers to reaching an agreement to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program - sequencing of actions by each party, uranium enrichment, and the peaceful use of nuclear power - have surfaced as substantive issues.

What *is* a surprise, and a good one at that, is the commitment to diplomacy demonstrated by both North Korea and the United States during the fourth round of talks. During the two weeks of talks, U.S. and North Korean officials met more frequently and at greater length than at any point during the first four and a half years of the Bush administration. The Bush administration's willingness to meet directly with North Korea is a welcome sign of progress on what remains a long and difficult road to a peaceful resolution of the proliferation crisis.

Now the work begins. Negotiators on all sides were aware of the issues before the talks began. What remains to be seen is how - or even if - the six parties have the wherewithal to break the issues down into small enough parts so that agreements can be reached on a step-by-step, trust-building basis.

The ambitious Statement of Principles may be part of the problem. As reported, the Statement appears to be not an outline of how to proceed with negotiations but instead a statement of where the talks will end, which logically can't be known until *after* negotiations.

Take North Korea's demand for the light water nuclear reactors (LWRs) promised by the 1994 Agreed Framework. The U.S. position, stated by chief U.S. negotiator Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill, is that the LWRs are "simply not on the table." However, in an encouraging sign, *The L.A. Times* quoted a senior U.S. official who believes that the North Koreans themselves don't expect to re-open the question about the reactors at this time. Instead, they raised the issue as a delaying tactic, rather than a true bargaining chip, and the U.S. "no" provided a face-saving excuse for the North Korean delegation to return to Pyongyang for consultation.

On the other hand, North Korea's demand for an independent indigenous energy source is easy to understand and should be carefully considered. If a viable energy program is not part of the

discussion it is unlikely that North Korea will allow the talks to move forward.

But at this point, the U.S. is unlikely to permit any civilian nuclear program to be part of the package. After four and half years of deteriorating relations between the United States and North Korea, during which North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, and reportedly reprocessed enough plutonium for up to six nuclear weapons, the U.S. administration is rightfully cautious about granting North Korea the tools to make more nuclear weapons material.

However, indigenous solutions for North Korea's energy needs, perhaps by wind or hydroelectric power, need to be part of the program, but without naming specifics so early in the talks. South Korea's earlier offer of energy assistance was helpful in this regard, but the specifics can only be determined after the six parties have developed a minimal track record of success, which will take far longer than thirteen days.

Yet *The New York Times* recently reported Seoul's desire to offer a future civilian nuclear program: Deputy Foreign Minister Song Min-Soon stated, "Our position is that North Korea should abandon its nuclear program, and then we will adjust differences to pave the way for them to pursue a peaceful nuclear program as a sovereign state."

The question of civilian nuclear power can helpfully be *raised* at this point. However, *answering* the question prematurely solidifies a wedge issue between the U.S. and South Korea and jeopardizes the six party process as a whole. North Korea may think it is to its advantage to delineate the differences between the U.S. and the other parties, but instead it is risking getting to no instead of getting to yes.

Half a year ago, a South Korean politician commented off-the-record that the United States needed to make a comprehensive proposal if it wanted North Korea to come back to the negotiating table. In western society, she explained, meals are eaten one course at a time and therefore western diplomats are comfortable with negotiations that move forward course by course or phase by phase. However, on the Korean Peninsula all dishes are put on the table at once; Korean diplomats on both sides of the De-Militarized Zone, therefore, prefer to have a grand proposal with all the elements laid out in the beginning.

In a sense, the "Statement of Principles" that the six parties are striving to develop sounds like a Korean meal: all six parties seem to be trying to determine the end results before the actual negotiations begin. The problem with this approach is that the trust level remains so low that each party is fearful that some of the dishes contain hidden doses of poison. A Statement of Principles should instead be a menu - an outline of what is to be discussed at subsequent bilateral and working-group meetings without anticipating conclusions. Only much later in the negotiations will the parties be able to reach an agreement and proceed with the even more difficult task of implementation.

In the midst of round four, the six party process is finally off to a good start - but there is a long way to go. At an August 7th Press Conference, Assistant Secretary Hill reiterated his commitment to continue direct talks with North Korea during the recess. Such an approach will go a long way toward whittling away at the divisive issues and may result in more good news.

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

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