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# Policy Forum 07-051: The Prospects for Institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks



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# The Prospects for Institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks

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By Keun-sik Kim

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## I. Introduction

Keun-sik Kim, Professor in the Department of Political Diplomacy at Kyungnam University, writes, "It is hoped that the success of the Six-Party Talks and their development into an institution for multilateral security cooperation will serve to promote peace, security, and unity in Northeast Asia."

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. Article by Keun-sik Kim**

- "The Prospects for Institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks"

By Keun-sik Kim

### Introduction

The North Korean nuclear issue remains unresolved, though almost four years have passed since the crisis began in October 2002. The joint statement issued on September 19, 2005 offered the possibility of a solution, but the state of distrust and confrontation between North Korea (DPRK) and the United States has not changed significantly. After signing the joint statement, the two countries continued to wrangle over the issue of the light-water reactors. Then, the financial sanctions imposed by the U.S. on the North became the primary point of contention. It is against this background that the Six-Party Talks stalled and implementation of the September 19th joint statement has taken a backseat. This was followed by North Korea test-firing missiles as part of its strategy of brinksmanship, and the U.S. has continued to apply pressure through the passage of a Security Council resolution, thereby raising the possibility of full-fledged sanctions. Recent concessions by Washington in facilitating the transfer of DPRK funds frozen in Banco Delta Asia, seems to have set the stage for renewed progress in fulfilling the September statement and subsequent February 13 Agreement, and returning to six-party talks in Beijing.

There is no doubt that the Korean Peninsula can achieve neither peace nor prosperity without the resolution of the nuclear issue. The talks have been through many ups and downs, but the road to a peaceful solution still exists, even if it is long. It is clear that if the nuclear issue does not change course, it will be a source of instability not only in inter-Korean relations but also for all of Northeast Asia. Although the Roh Moo-hyun administration clarified early on that it would deal with the nuclear issue and inter-Korean relations separately, in reality the South Korean government cannot develop better relations unless the issue is satisfactorily resolved. Separate track or no, the nuclear issue will never have a positive effect on inter-Korean relations.

Similarly, the issue can only hinder the establishment of a peaceful Korean Peninsula and a stable Northeast Asian order. In spite of the trend toward increased cooperation in Northeast Asia, which was made possible by the promotion of peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula after the end of the cold war, the very existence of the nuclear issue has placed the peninsula in a tense crisis situation and even threatens the peace in the region. In the event that the multilateral framework of the Six-Party Talks is unable to bring about a successful outcome, it will be difficult to achieve meaningful progress on Northeast Asian security and cooperation in the future. The resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue is a necessary condition for true progress in inter-Korean relations and a new, peaceful Northeast Asia in the post-cold war era.

### Prospects for Institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks

When the joint statement was issued on September 19, 2005, the future of the Six-Party Talks seemed bright: it was even hoped that the talks would go beyond their original purpose of resolving the nuclear issue and develop into a framework for multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. It is readily apparent that the six participant countries did engage in multilateral cooperation during the course of the negotiations.

Generally speaking, multilateralism can be defined as an institutional form in which three or more

states with differing interests participate and coordinate their respective policies according to certain principles or standards. The relations between these states are mediated through "generalized principles of conduct." <sup>(1)</sup> A multilateral system promotes international cooperation by offering a forum where foreign policy can be adjusted and fine-tuned.

From this perspective, it is undeniable that the Six-Party Talks developed a multilateral nature through the process of negotiations. Multilateralism is premised on the fact that participating countries must be willing to lay aside their individual demands in order to reach agreement on a common goal. The Six-Party Talks were indeed characterized by this type of negotiation, where both North Korea and the U.S. yielded on some of their demands to arrive at the joint statement.

Furthermore, the multilateral character of the talks can be inferred from the fact that the negotiations possess their own inherent dynamic and logic that have evolved over the course of the five meetings. In particular, America found itself outnumbered five-to-one on the final revision presented by China at the fourth meeting and ended up accepting North Korea's peaceful use of nuclear power and the provision of a light-water reactor. The Six-Party Talks function according to a movement and logic of their own, outside of America's political purposes. If America alone were to have refused the plan formulated through a collaborative process and approved by the other five parties, then it would have to shoulder the political burden and assume responsibility for rupturing the talks.

Although the Six-Party Talks exhibit a certain degree of multilateralism, they do not embody the principle in a complete sense. The fundamental character of the talks is still dominated by the confrontational DPRK vs. U.S. paradigm. <sup>(2)</sup> Not all parties have equal standing in the negotiations, which are overwhelmingly led by North Korea and the U.S. The participant countries have not settled on either principles or standards for the talks, nor have they formed an agenda relevant to all parties outside of the nuclear issue. The Six-Party Talks are multilateral in the sense that several states have negotiated and come to some agreement on the nuclear issue, but lack other characteristic elements, such as generalized principles of conduct, equal standing between participants, and an inclusive common agenda. <sup>(3)</sup>

In spite of this, the prospects for multilateral development are still very much alive. If the parties are able to build trust by solving the nuclear issue, create a common agenda, and form basic principles for collaboration, then the Six-Party Talks could even evolve into an institutional apparatus for multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Given that multilateralism is closely tied to institutions, a regional cooperative security regime could be institutionalized if the talks were to be established as a permanent body for discussing a common agenda.

It is still possible for the Six-Party Talks to develop into a framework for Northeast Asian security cooperation, but first the talks must be reopened, going beyond the missile crisis, and the process embodied by the joint statement gotten underway. Through the September 19th statement, the participant countries have already "committed to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia" and "agreed to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia." In other words, if the statement is put into practice then the six-party forum could function as a meaningful framework for regional multilateral cooperation. In fact, the parties are already contemplating the policy implications for the development of the talks into a multilateral security body in the event of their favorable progress. The South Korean government has revealed its intention to "investigate a plan for developing the Six-Party Talks into a framework for security dialogue in Northeast Asia," <sup>(4)</sup> which has been directly corroborated by President Roh Moo-hyun himself. <sup>(5)</sup> It has been reported on multiple occasions that several high-ranking American officials have mentioned the possibility of developing the talks into a regional security body. <sup>(6)</sup> China, Japan, and Russia also appear to be in support of such a scheme. North Korea's position remains

undisclosed, but it stands to reason that it would not have any objections, given the general theory that "from the point of view of weaker states, an international system is the only means of restraining stronger states from exercising their power according to their will." <sup>(7)</sup> The talks could offer a check on America's power if they evolved into a multilateral security forum that guarantees participants' equal standing.

However, the road to institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks and creating a genuine cooperative security regime is not an easy one. The talks, being the first step to regional security cooperation, possess both promise and significance, but they also have structural limitations under the present conditions. As such, it is difficult to be entirely optimistic about the possibility of institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks. More than anything, this is due to the extant barriers to resolving the nuclear issue and the persisting state of confrontation between North Korea and the U.S. If the six parties are unable to achieve their original goal of peacefully settling the nuclear crisis, then the talks are unlikely to develop in a positive direction. In particular, if America and North Korea are unable to establish a new relationship in which they can peacefully coexist, then multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia does not stand a chance.

The most pressing tasks for fostering the creation of a collaborative regional security regime are accumulating experience in multilateral cooperation through the process of solving the nuclear issue and paving the way for peaceful coexistence of the DPRK and U.S. However, the nuclear standoff remains unresolved and relations between the two countries have actually worsened. Plans to develop security cooperation cannot even begin to be implemented unless the North Korean nuclear issue is settled. As such, there is an acute need for Seoul to take an active role in the matter, as previously mentioned.

Furthermore, developing a cooperative framework for military and security matters will not prove to be easy, given the particular characteristics of Northeast Asian affairs. In spite of dynamic regional economic cooperation and the possibility of economic integration, Northeast Asia is still plagued by political and military instability. More than anything, the latent causes for dispute between China and the U.S. could hinder multilateral cooperation in the region. In addition to Sino-American competition, the struggle for dominance between China and Japan is expanding. The deepening confrontation between the American-Japanese alliance and Sino-Russian cooperation is also a factor in hindering political and military collaboration. Moreover, the fact that latent disagreements over territory and interpretations of history still exist between Japan and China, Russia, and South Korea demonstrates the difficulty of cooperation in Northeast Asia. In light of these dormant disputes, regional instability and the experience of the Six-Party Talks, one should not be overly optimistic about the prospects for security cooperation in the region.

The institutionalization of the talks and promotion of multilateral security cooperation demand a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue as well as simultaneous efforts to ease political and military instability in the region. China and America must settle on a cooperative relationship, while China and Japan must mitigate their competition over hegemony and defense spending. The Japan-America vs. China-Russia face-off must be managed so as to prevent the level of tension from increasing, and Japan should settle the issues of its past, which lies at the heart of territorial and historical disputes in the region.

Of course, all this will not be easily achieved. Multilateral security cooperation should be pursued concomitantly with easing instability in the region, rather than considering the latter to be a precondition for the former. Given that political and military instability, as well as traditional and nontraditional security threats, still exists in Northeast Asia, it may be advisable to first foster cooperation on nontraditional security affairs, such as terrorism and WMD, natural disasters, environmental concerns, drug trafficking, human rights, prevention of infectious diseases like bird

flu, and displaced persons. In the context of the complex, conflicting relations in Northeast Asia, it is more efficient to promote cooperation on postmodern, nontraditional security affairs that can be more easily agreed upon. By the same logic, it is hoped that collaborative discussion of the North Korean nuclear issue at the Six-Party Talks will lead to multilateral cooperation on a variety of issues.

The sense of peace and security in Northeast Asia is sure to increase in the event that the Six-Party Talks successfully resolve the nuclear issue and are developed into a productive institution for discussing matters of regional interest. Once formed, an international institution, whose main function is to make cooperation possible, carries its own momentum. The creation of an institution for multilateral security cooperation that originates from the Six-Party Talks could become the first step to peace and stability in the region.

The 1975 Helsinki Accord, which included provisions for mutual respect of sovereignty, security guarantees, economic cooperation and human rights, offered a framework for the end of cold war hostilities between East and West. In the same way, it is hoped that the success of the Six-Party Talks and their development into an institution for multilateral security cooperation will serve to promote peace, security, and unity in Northeast Asia.

-- FOOTNOTES (1) For more on multilateralism, see John Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1992); Robert Keohane, "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research," *International Journal*, Vol. 45 (Autumn, 1990); James Caporaso, "International Relation Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundation," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1992); John Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University press, 1993).

(2) America is utilizing the Six-Party Talks to induce the North to give up its nuclear program; North Korea is utilizing the talks and playing its nuclear card to gain security assurances and economic assistance.

(3) Kim Tae-woon, "A Study of Multilateralism in Practice at the Six-Party Talks and Plans to Develop a Base of Multilateral Cooperation," *North Korean Studies Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2005, pp. 11-13.

(4) National Security Council, *Peace, Prosperity, and National Security: Plans for Security Policy*, 2004, p. 56.

(5) At the ROK-Japanese summit meeting in Jejudo in July 2004, President Roh stated that, "If the North Korean nuclear issue is resolved, then it would be desirable for the Six-Party Talks to be utilized as a framework for dialogue and negotiations on security issues in Northeast Asia." *The Chosun Ilbo*, July 22, 2004.

(6) It is reported that during a visit in July 2004, then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice sounded out China's views on elevating the Six-Party Talks into a permanent institution for discussing security guarantees in Northeast Asia. During his Senate confirmation hearing, former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick cited the talks as an example of a security structure that could be kept in the future.

(7) Choi Young-jong, "International System Theory," Woo Chul-gu and Park Gun-young (ed.), *Modern International Relations Theory and Korea*, *Society Review*, 2004, p. 355.

### **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](mailto: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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