

THE SIX-PARTY TALKS: KEEPING DIPLOMACY ALIVE By Balbina Y. Hwang, Ph.D.



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The Six-Party Talks: Keeping Diplomacy Alive

By Balbina Y. Hwang, Ph.D.

On February 25th, the second round of the much-anticipated Six-Party talks will open in Beijing. These talks are an effort by the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea to reach a diplomatic solution with North Korea to end its nuclear weapons programs. While a complete resolution to the nuclear issue is unlikely during this round, the meetings will nevertheless reaffirm the regional consensus that North Korea must take action to dismantle its illicit nuclear programs. The United States should remain firm in its stance that nothing less than "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of North Korea's nuclear programs will be acceptable.

Background

The current standoff began in October 2002 when North Korea admitted to U.S. officials that it was pursuing a highly enriched uranium program in violation of several international agreements, including the 1994 Agreed Framework. When the United States suspended fuel oil shipments to North Korea, per the Agreed Framework, North Korea responded by ejecting UN inspectors from its

plutonium facility in Yongbyon and restarting its reactors.

North Korea's position is that its nuclear arms programs are a defensive response to the hostility of the Bush administration, and it therefore demands security guarantees in addition to diplomatic recognition from the United States.

But Pyongyang's claims are spurious. North Korea's nuclear programs go back to the 1990s, well before the Bush administration came into office. Moreover, North Korea already possesses a successful deterrent against potential U.S. military action: its conventional forces, including a million-man army arrayed at the border with South Korea that is capable of destroying Seoul.

Current Challenges

Recently, North Korea has hinted that it will offer to freeze its activities at Yongbyon in exchange for energy assistance, security guarantees, and the lifting of trade sanctions by the United States. But the Bush Administration's position has remained firm: only upon North Korea's initial actions to "completely, verifiably and irreversibly" dismantle its nuclear programs will the United States consider economic assistance and security assurances.

While disagreement over the sequence of these actions was at the heart of the discussions during the first round of talks last September, this week's meetings will likely focus on questions about North Korea's separate program to produce highly-enriched uranium (HEU) for nuclear weapons. Despite its October 2002 admission of HEU production, Pyongyang has since vehemently denied the existence of this program. Washington will press Pyongyang to fully disclose and dismantle its HEU program, in addition to its plutonium facilities. North Korea's continued denial will damage the possibility of continuing future negotiations.

Although U.S. intelligence capabilities have come under question in recent months, Pakistani Abdul Qadeer Khan's confessions about aiding North Korea has strengthened Washington's position on North Korea's HEU programs. Nevertheless, skepticism among the other four parties -- particularly China and South Korea -- about the HEU programs will likely embolden North Korea, which has before capitalized on uncertainty to drive wedges among allies and divide coalitions.

Remain Firm

Given these challenges, during the talks in Beijing the United States should:

- **Make clear that the HEU issue is not solely bilateral between the United States and North Korea.** Although the plutonium program is generally considered a more immediate threat than the uranium program, North Korea's pursuit of both seriously jeopardizes security in the region and the global non-proliferation regime. The other four parties in the talks - China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia - must join the United States in urging North Korea to come clean on all of its nuclear programs.
- **Remain firm in its stance that nothing less than "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of North Korea's nuclear programs will be acceptable.** A North Korean "freeze" of the Yongbyon facility will be inadequate to gain concessions from the United States and should not be accepted as a temporary measure.
- **Make explicit to North Korea that time is running out.** Pyongyang's strategy may be to stall any further action or dialogue until after the presidential elections in November. But the United States should make clear that the international community will not wait indefinitely for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear programs.
- **Encourage China, South Korea, and Russia to cooperate with U.S.-led efforts to curb North Korean proliferation of dangerous weapons and illicit activities.** Japan has already signed on to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a multilateral effort to halt the transfer of WMD materials and missiles. Another effort is to enhance law enforcement, judicial cooperation, and sharing of intelligence in the region to address North Korea's illicit and criminal activities.

A Permanent End

The primary goal of the next round of Six-Party talks in Beijing is to keep alive the existing mechanism of dialogue in order to permanently end North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Although a concrete solution is unlikely to emerge from this round of talks, the recent decision by Libya to give up its weapons programs shows that diplomacy can yield success. The Six-Party format is the best available forum to maintain momentum with North Korea, and only time will tell if it will be sufficient.

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