

Multilateral Dialogue to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Issue

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by Donald S. Zagoria

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I. Introduction

Donald S. Zagoria, Project Director for Northeast Asia Projects at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), wrote this summary report from the 3rd Conference on Northeast Asian Security Co-sponsored by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) and the DPRK Institute for Disarmament and Peace (DPRK IDP). The report states: "it is unclear whether North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons program. But in the next year or two, there will be an opportunity to test that country's intentions through a serious diplomatic effort. A well-organized

and well-focused Track 1.5 effort could play an important role in assisting the official U.S. effort."

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II. Report by Donald S. Zagoria

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Introduction

A distinguishing activity of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), for which it is slowly gaining international recognition, is its "behind the scenes" efforts to convene direct, off-the-record talks between adversaries to defuse and resolve conflicts. Toward this end, the NCAFP has pursued Track 1.5 talks with the North Koreans for the past three years. Officials from both Washington and Pyongyang who attended our last meeting from June 30-July 1, 2005 in New York gave the NCAFP credit for having played a "decisive" role in bringing about the resumption of official six-party talks in late July in Beijing.

The meeting included officials from both the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea), as well as officials from the other four parties involved, along with a number of former U.S. officials, congressional staff members, and scholars.

U.S. and Korean Peninsula Perspectives

The conference began with an observation from an American participant that this moment in time offers both great opportunities and great dangers. The participant noted the strong sense, on the American side, that time is running out if a catastrophe is to be avoided and that it was essential to return to the six party dialogue and soon. He pointed to some optimistic signs. On the North Korean side, there was an important and positive meeting between Chairman Kim Jong-il and the South Korean Minister of Unification, Chung Dong-young.

The North Korean leader made the following points in that meeting: 1. North Korea's development of nuclear weapons is to deter the United States which seeks to topple the North Korean regime. But, if the U.S. has no intention to depose the regime, there is no reason to possess nuclear weapons. 2. Once the nuclear issue is resolved, North Korea will come back into the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and accept International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. 3. Regarding the transfer of nuclear materials, North Korea is fully aware of U.S. concerns and has no intention of transferring nuclear material to rogue states or individuals. 4. If the United States establishes friendly relations with North Korea, Pyongyang will dismantle its missile program and accept the guidelines of the Missile Control Technology Regime (MCTR). It will also dismantle its intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and long-range missiles. 5. The 1992 North-South Korea denuclearization agreement is still valid. It was one of the most important legacies left by his father and former DPRK leader, Kim Il-Sung. 6. The North could return to the six-party talks as early as July.

There were also encouraging signs on the American side. U.S. leaders have now reiterated that there is no intention to topple the DPRK regime nor is there an intention to invade North Korea. And the very fact that three U.S. officials attended our conference was also a positive sign.

The participant went on to say that despite the obvious lack of trust between the United States and North Korea, necessity often drives nations together despite a lack of trust. Churchill did not trust

Stalin but necessity drove them together. Today there is no rational alternative to a peaceful solution of the nuclear standoff.

A North Korean participant observed that meetings such as this were "very useful" in helping each side to understand the concerns of the other. The DPRK, he said, was looking for solutions and would present views on its concept of how to define the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

There was a statement of deep appreciation for the NCAFP role in organizing this meeting at this critical moment from an official from one of the other six parties. He urged the DPRK to return to the six-party talks in order to slow down the negative cycle of events that had begun on February 10, 2005, when the DPRK suspended its participation in the talks.

It has been the consistent goal of the DPRK, a North Korean stated, to realize the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and this was also the desire of the great leader, Kim Il-sung, in his lifetime. The denuclearization of the Korean peninsula was an idea originated by the DPRK in order to free North Korea from the U.S. nuclear threat. This is why North Korea had agreed to the Agreed Framework. But the process of denuclearization was frustrated from the very beginning by the Bush Administration, which denied North Korea's ideology and system and "branded [them] as an axis of evil and an outpost of tyranny." Since the beginning of the Bush Administration, argued the participant, the U.S. has pursued an openly hostile policy towards the DPRK. Moreover, North Korea is a potential target for preemptive nuclear strikes. U.S. strategic bombers are in South Korea and there are nuclear exercises on an annual basis. Also, the United States has been spending money on developing small nuclear weapons that have the ability to destroy underground bunkers in North Korea.

The North Korean participant went on to say that North Korea's desire to have nuclear weapons is a product of the U.S. threat and hostile U.S. policy. Denuclearization means "removing the threat of nuclear war from the Korean peninsula and the vicinity." It also means, the participant continued, that the U.S. must roll back its hostile policy aimed at toppling the DPRK. The United States should remove its nuclear umbrella and end all nuclear war exercises in and around the Korean peninsula. The DPRK learned from Iraq that it can only safeguard its rights by having deterrent forces. Unilateral dismantlement of its nuclear weapons cannot solve the problem.

An American participant thanked the NCAFP for the "outstanding work which we appreciate" and went on to take issue with the North Korean presentation. The United States, he argued, had put on the table a proposal on June 4, 2005 that Pyongyang said was serious, but then North Korea walked away from the table and this began an impasse which lasted for over a year. There was a need to resume the talks. Both President Bush and Secretary of State Rice have stated that the United States seeks a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue, that the United States recognizes North Korea as a sovereign state, and that the U.S. has no intention to attack or invade North Korea.

Another American participant responded to a North Korean participant who had called for an elimination of the U.S. nuclear "umbrella" over the Korean peninsula by saying that U.S. security policy in Northeast Asia has objectives beyond North Korea. He contended that if the U.S. removed its nuclear umbrella from Northeast Asia, other countries such as Japan and Taiwan would develop their own nuclear capabilities.

In response, a North Korean participant said that he was "relieved" to hear some of the American presentations which accorded the DPRK equality and respect. He added that North Korea's position was firm and if there was no threat from the U.S., there would be no reason for the DPRK to have nuclear weapons. As to how precisely to remove the U.S. threat, it would be necessary to have a discussion. The North Korean participant also wanted assurances from the U.S. side that the United

States was not asking for unilateral DPRK dismantlement of its nuclear forces.

There were several comments made during the conference proceedings that addressed issues that would need to be negotiated at the six-party talks - issues such as security assurances, timing, verification and a list of common principles.

On the issue of security assurances, an American participant said that according to the U.S. proposal advanced in June 2004, there would be "immediate" provisional security assurances upon commencement of the dismantlement process and "permanent" security assurances once North Korea eliminated its nuclear weapons.

There was also much discussion about the proper sequencing of actions. A North Korean participant argued there needed to be simultaneous rather than sequential actions.

An American participant said that the dispute over sequencing was going to make progress difficult. He suggested that the parties first agree on a list of principles that they could agree on - e.g. a stable and secure Korean peninsula, a non-nuclear Korean peninsula, mutual respect, etc. - and then go on to discuss the means to reach those objectives.

Another American concurred that it would be important to define the principle of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and then to agree on how to verify it.

A North Korean participant added that North Korea felt humiliated by the fact that the United States did not send its messages directly to North Korea but transmitted them through third parties. The U.S. needs to treat the DPRK with equality and send its messages directly.

Finally, an American participant added to the list of issues to be negotiated-ending the Korean War and finding a way for North Korea to share in regional prosperity.

ANOTHER U.S. PERSPECTIVE

An American speaker was optimistic that the six-party talks would resume and they would come to a positive conclusion. Several factors, he noted, in international relations have led to the view that a time for a settlement is approaching. The recent conversation between the South Korean Unification Minister and the North Korean leader indicated that bargaining was now about the negotiations-no longer about whether negotiations should occur. Once the six parties come to an agreement in principle on what to achieve, they will not fail. Furthermore, talks on the sidelines could go on constantly, he added, which could include bilateral U.S.-DPRK talks. With regard to North Korea's desire for security assurances, these could best be met by multilateral guarantees. Moreover, if North Korea is worried about regime change, it would be more meaningful for them to have multilateral guarantees.

The speaker went on to say that the United States understands what North Korea wants and Pyongyang understands what the Washington wants. So the time had come to resume negotiations. North Korea will need to abandon its nuclear weapons program in return for its continued existence as a sovereign state without foreign intervention and without fear of being overthrown. To be sure, there exists a point of view in the United States that favors overthrowing any regime that is opposed to U.S. values. These U.S. "idealists" make no allowance for time or historical evolution-they want everything now. They also hold the view that there are no foreign policy problems, only problems resulting from domestic structures. Therefore their emphasis is on changing the domestic structure of other states. This is one point of view in the U.S. and serious people, including senior people, hold it, but it is not the dominant view. The goal should be to try and keep it from achieving realistic

objectives thereby becoming the dominant view. The time has come for a negotiated settlement. The speaker said he was convinced that the U.S. would meet North Korea's reasonable security concerns.

However, he warned that the U.S. could not alter its force deployments in Asia and would not withhold nuclear protection from its allies. Nevertheless North Korean concerns could be met and they could be embodied in a multilateral framework.

He went on to say that there needed to be an agreement on principles before a serious bilateral conversation could take place.

The speaker concluded that even from a geo-strategic point of view, the time has come for a settlement. All of the major powers agree that nuclear weapons in North Korea are a danger to global stability. It is now necessary to end nuclear proliferation. If a greater number of countries were to develop nuclear weapons, a catastrophe would become inevitable. Every state, including North Korea, has an interest in bringing an end to the nuclear proliferation issue.

North Korea, the speaker stated, must make a decision. If its purpose is to drive the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region and to unify Korea, nuclear proliferation will not work. But if North Korea recognizes that proliferation is a global problem and that there can be no new nuclear powers, it will be possible to find a solution.

The ultimate guarantee of North Korea's legitimate desire for security would be membership into the international system. For this reason, over the longer run, it will be necessary to develop a Northeast Asia security system with its own principles of coexistence.

In sum, the speaker said that: the time for negotiations had come; the more positive tone from North Korea was a step in the right direction; the nuclear problem must be solved; and there must be respect for all parties in the negotiation. But the nuclear issue should not be used to shake up the entire geopolitical structure of Northeast Asia.

A North Korean participant asked the speaker whether the United States could engage in "ping-pong diplomacy" with North Korea as it had done in the past with China. And, would the speaker encourage a high level U.S. official to visit Pyongyang? The speaker responded that the time is not yet ripe for such a visit. But that it could happen once a new atmosphere develops.

A U.S. participant then asked the speaker if the United States and North Korea had any common interests. The speaker responded by saying that a war in the 21st century would have consequences completely out of proportion to any possible gains, and that security for all states in the Asia-Pacific region could be obtained by creating a structure in which everyone could live and feel secure. A Track II group such as the NCAFP could work on a set of common principles.

In response to the question of an American as to how to break out of the present stalemate, the speaker said that North Korea had an interest in dealing with a conservative U.S. administration. It was necessary to return to the six-party talks, establish working groups and to develop a set of common principles for moving forward.

Perspectives in the Region

A participant stated that the conference organized by the NCAFP was timely and useful. There were several positive factors. First, North Korean and U.S. officials had met twice in New York and sent out a positive message. Second, the ROK Unification Minister had met with North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il. It is necessary to build on these developments, resume the six-party talks, and build

trust.

Another participant laid out the position of another party to the talks. This position has three elements: first, there should be no nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula; second, all issues could be settled peacefully; and third, there should be no instability in the Korean peninsula. He said there was no reasonable alternative to the six-party talks. And he called for a Northeast Asia energy dialogue.

A North Korean participant said that North Korea's position on the resumption of the six-party talks was clear. North Korea believed that the U.S. position was to stifle North Korea and to threaten North Korea with nuclear weapons. That is why North Korea abandoned the six-party talks. But after the "good remarks" made by U.S. officials now, there is "a favorable climate for another round of the six-party talks." And, it is necessary to keep this momentum going. The North Korean speaker said we "need a successful meeting" of the six parties in order to "resolve the nuclear issue permanently." It was also necessary, he concluded, to set up a "legal mechanism" on the Korean peninsula to end the Cold War.

There was much discussion of the initiative to begin an energy dialogue. An American participant said that the U.S. government is paying much attention to the energy issue and has had bilateral dialogues on the energy issue with a number of countries in the region, including China, Japan and South Korea. He said the countries of the region should work together to produce a sense of common purpose.

Other participants thought it would be a mistake to divert the six-party talks from the main issue of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The energy issue, they suggested, could be pursued in other dialogues.

Several participants also said that it might be a useful idea for the six parties to talk about their strategic visions and the respective roles each country sought to play in the region. Others said the wisest course would be to concentrate on the nuclear issue.

An American participant concluded the day's meetings by observing that he detected a thirst for greater contact among the participants and that Track II and Track 1.5 was the appropriate mechanism for such contact.

Breaking the Impasse

A U.S. participant, leading off a session on how to break out of the impasse, said that an indefinite stalemate was unacceptable and that there were better or worse ways to break the impasse. A "good" way to break the impasse would be to reconvene the six-party talks. If there was a "bad" way to break the impasse - i.e. a confrontation between North Korea and the U.S. - this would be a mortal blow to the negotiating track.

There were, he continued, good grounds for optimism about resuming the six-party talks, but several things needed to be accomplished. First, the parties needed to set an early date for the resumption of talks. Second, they needed to commit to negotiate seriously. Time is in fact running out, as several people noted, and it would be necessary to buy time in order to let the negotiating process work. Third, North Korea needed to stop the clock on its nuclear weapons program by taking some unilateral step such as freezing its program as a confidence building measure. Then the U.S. and other parties should reciprocate. The objective would be to buy time and to reduce mutual mistrust. The American went on to make a distinction between U.S. "attitudes" and U.S. "policies." Statements about the "axis of evil" represented an attitude. Statements that the U.S. accepts North Korea as a

sovereign state are a statement of policy. It will be necessary to continue reassuring rhetoric and to exchange unilateral confidence building measures.

There was a striking consensus at this meeting, he continued, to develop a set of principles for the nuclear talks. But principles that are too vague will not be helpful. And principles that are too narrow will also not be helpful. It is necessary to strike the right middle ground. The six parties should go back to the 1992 North-South Korean agreement as a point of departure. Then they should build and sustain momentum in the talks and develop a road map which would include a "vision" for the future. That is, each side must have a view of its role in Northeast Asia and some strategic vision for the region. North Korea did not exist in a vacuum. And if security assurances for North Korea are to be robust, economic cooperation and trade with other parties in the region will play an important role. Economic cooperation is a security assurance. There must also be thought given as to how to get senior leaders on all sides involved.

A North Korean participant, addressing the same issue - i.e. on how to break the impasse - said that improved U.S.-DPRK relations are a precondition for resolving the nuclear issue. "We want recognition of our social system," he said, and a political decision on the part of the United States to live peacefully with the DPRK. Americans say that North Korea must make a strategic choice to dismantle their nuclear weapons. But the U.S. must also make a strategic decision to coexist with the DPRK. North Korea is still suspicious of U.S. intent, he argued. Is the United States willing to coexist? Or is the United States focused on toppling the North Korean system? The lesson that North Korea gleaned from the War in Iraq was that without a "proper deterrent," a country's regime could be brought down. For this reason, it is necessary for North Korea to have diplomatic relations with the U.S. in order to remove any fear that the U.S. is seeking regime change. If the U.S. has a genuine interest in resolving the nuclear issue, the participant suggested, it needs to "roll up its sleeves," and "be courageous" in establishing wide ranging interaction with North Korea. The North Korean participant went on to say that the U.S. should show respect to North Korea and treat it equally. The United States ought to talk to the DPRK directly; recognize its social system and sovereignty; end sanctions; and establish diplomatic relations. The North Korean speaker concluded by agreeing with an American participant who had earlier said that "necessity" was driving the two sides closer together.

An American participant spelled out a number of "common principles" that all six parties might agree on:

- a. the end goal is denuclearization of the Korean peninsula;
- b. there is a need for a peaceful resolution of the issue;
- c. North Korea should be integrated into the Northeast Asian community;
- d. all parties had an interest in a peaceful and stable Northeast Asia;
- e. all parties agreed that North Korea should be provided with security assurances and energy assistance in exchange for denuclearizing.

Another American participant added that President Bush had made clear that he seeks a peaceful diplomatic solution. And, the "axis of evil" rhetoric had disappeared at the highest levels.

A North Korean participant said that the discussions at this meeting were quite productive and hopeful.

Several U.S. participants said that the U.S. Congress was closely watching this meeting and was eager for a resumption of talks. Both the U.S. government and the U.S. Congress were planning for

success in resuming the six-party talks. However, they cautioned there is a need to move forward quickly.

Concluding Remarks

An American participant offered the following summary of the two day meeting. First, there is a mood of cautious optimism. The atmosphere is more promising than in the past. This is due to rising flexibility in both the United States and North Korea. Washington had undergone a "learning process" and now realizes the costs of unilateralism and the costs of conflict. But there remains a lack of trust on both sides.

Second, he continued, once the six-party talks resume, the two key issues will be verification and sequencing. Third, the U.S. must deal with the question of "respect" for North Korea's sovereignty. Finally, there are three levels for moving forward. There is an indispensable role for governments. But there is also a continuing need for Track 1.5 meetings such as these which could have an influence on governments. And finally there must be an increase in people-to-people contact.

It is unclear whether North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons program. But in the next year or two, there will be an opportunity to test that country's intentions through a serious diplomatic effort. A well-organized and well-focused Track 1.5 effort could play an important role in assisting the official U.S. effort.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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