

Prospects for the Second Round of Six Party Talks: The Role of South Korea

Cheong Wooksik

Representative of Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea

Introduction

Six months after the first round of six-party talks opened in August of last year the second round of talks are slated for February 25th of this year. From the inauguration of the George W. Bush administration to the beginning of the North Korean nuclear issue, the continuing crisis on the Korean peninsula has entered a new phase with the multilateral talks. At this point the six-party talks are not a means for resolving the problem but are a process for stitching together a critical wound before it gets any worse. It should be understood that further delay or failure of the six-nation talks will only throw the peninsula into a far greater crisis.

Of course many experts as well as government officials do not expect a major breakthrough in this new round of talks. After an announcement was made, the Republic of Korea's (ROK) representative, Assistant Foreign Minister Soo-hyuk Lee, hinted at the difficulty of achieving a breakthrough by saying, "although there are no great expectations for this round of talks, it is a good opportunity for each of the countries involved to clearly express their positions." Russian representative, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov responded by stating that "there is still a significant difference in positions between the United States and North Korea" and "it is difficult to expect a considerable breakthrough."

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the United States, the main parties concerned, have both responded to the talks with the importance of showing sincerity to the other side while continuing to adhere to their original positions. Such gloomy responses together with the prospects for the talks increase the chances that this second round will end without notable results. However, if we understand the results of the meetings as not just merely a "given" but as being "made," the Roh Moo Hyun government needs to firmly resolve to "gain at least a few yards toward a solution."

“Gaining a few yards” means finding a point of convergence between the “freezing vs. compensation” that North Korea has proposed and “the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of the North’s nuclear program required by the United States as well as laying a foundation to narrow the gap over suspicions surrounding the issue of the North’s alleged highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. If a joint agreement that was discussed at the first round can be reached and the regularization of the six-party talks with the embarkation of a working group can be achieved, the nuclear issue can enter a resolution phase. For this to occur, the Roh government needs to assume a more active role and equip itself with the logic and authority necessary to persuade and mediate between North Korea and the United States. North Korea’s recent positive attitude, subtle changes in U.S. policy, and China’s active role as a mediator lend great potential to accomplishing such tasks.

New Direction for ROK-U.S. Cooperation: From the “passenger’s seat” to the “driver’s seat”

It is imperative that the Roh government persuades the Bush administration to be less ambiguous in its attitude and work more toward concrete proposals. With the administration facing an upcoming presidential election and the embarrassment surrounding suspicions over manipulation of intelligence on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, Washington may show some positive change in its policy toward North Korea during this second round if it identifies the talks as a face-saving opportunity. The Bush administration’s recent comment that “diplomatic progress is being made” expresses its confidence in a resolution and indicates an attempt to minimize any “political stress” related to the approaching presidential election.

Of course Washington’s assertion of “diplomatic progress” could be coming out of a different context involving the notion that the nuclear issue is not just between the United States and North Korea, that Pyongyang’s nuclear card is a challenge to the international community—the primary assertion of the Bush administration—and that the six-party talks should include other countries such as China, Russia, South Korea and Japan to agree on the need to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear program. These notions also imply that the six-party talks are still working strongly as a structure of multilateral pressure on North Korea.

However, the external and internal complexities currently faced by the Bush administration forecast that such an approach will not be smooth. The international community's commitment to resolving the nuclear issue requires that the Bush administration participate in the negotiations with a sincere attitude and provide incentives to North Korea. If the Bush administration does not show sincerity and no progress is made, the multilateral pressure the administration desires may not work as planned.

It is important to note that those nations primarily involved in the "attack on Iraq" are plagued with continued bloodshed in the war-torn country and suspicions over intelligence concerning WMD. These factors have two important implications for Washington's North Korea policy. Firstly, Washington's hawks have less time to concern themselves with policy toward Pyongyang as they are still occupied with the war in Iraq. Secondly, the doves in the U.S. State Department now have more opportunity to lead North Korea policy initiatives. In addition, with the nuclear issue showing no end in sight, the Bush administration is concerned about Democratic Party candidates making an issue out of current policy toward the DPRK.

With these factors in mind, the Bush administration is faced with having to re-examine its North Korea policy. The administration has two options: To continue with its existing hardline policy or seek a face-saving exit through a more sincere posture oriented toward negotiations. This presents a good opportunity for Seoul to readjust the U.S.-ROK cooperative framework as a "passenger" in a relationship it has had difficulty breaking out of under the influence of hardliners in Washington. The new cooperative relationship should move the ROK out of the "passenger seat" and into the "driver's seat" in order for Seoul to take the lead in dealing with Pyongyang.

This can be achieved by persuading the Bush administration on three different points. The first point relates to the Agreed Framework. What the Bill Clinton administration called its "greatest diplomatic achievement" the Bush administration has termed a "great disgrace." Accordingly, this gives the Bush administration an opportunity to champion any agreement concluded at the six-party talks, that replaces the Agreed Framework, as a diplomatic victory. Any new agreement will naturally require the complete dismantlement of Pyongyang's nuclear program, therefore, it must be emphasized to the United States that a more flexible attitude at this second round of talks may be the only way to achieve such an agreement. Secondly, it should be stressed that Washington is

getting what it wants—a resolution through multilateral talks. North Korea has withdrawn its original stance of insisting on bilateral negotiations only and has toned down its insistence that the nuclear issue was triggered by the hostile policy of the United States. In addition, Pyongyang has participated in three-party talks and six-party talks which has helped the Bush administration save face. Thirdly, the Bush administration should be persuaded to solve the nuclear issue in a similar manner to its latest diplomatic achievement of having Libya give up its WMD which was basically achieved through unofficial contacts between the two countries, the lifting of economic sanctions, incentives from the United States, and the mediating role of other countries such as England, Saudi Arabia, etc.

Core Issues and a Resolution

Seoul needs to seize the opportunity of this round of talks to convince Washington to work toward minimizing the level of disagreement it has with Pyongyang. At the same time, South Korea needs to examine closely the core issues and work to prevent any kind of breakdown of the talks due to these issues. The core issues for this round of talks are: reaching agreement on the North's proposal of "freezing vs. compensation," and more specifically whether North Korea will accept the U.S. demand for "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement" of its nuclear program, and the issue of the HEU program. In addition to these issues, Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea, regularization of the talks, the formation of a working group, and the participation of the European Union (EU) are important but are not likely to be major factors affecting the success or failure of the talks.

First, with regard to "freezing vs. compensation," North Korea has proposed to suspend the production of additional nuclear weapons and cease operation of its nuclear reactor as its promise to "freeze" its nuclear program. In return North Korea expects to be removed from Washington's list of terrorism-sponsoring states, the lifting of political, economic and military sanctions and blockade, and provided with energy support by way of heavy fuel oil, electricity, etc. Originally, the United States frowned on such a proposal but has recently been showing more willingness to discuss it.

Yet, the United States has expressed many times that it "will not reward North Korea for the deeds it should have done in the past" and although it is showing some interest in the North's freeze proposal, it is still likely that Washington will reject its demands. In

addition, this second round of talks are likely to involve bickering over who bears responsibility for the Agreed Framework becoming a mere scrap a paper.

It is regrettable that the Roh government's efforts to narrow the gap between the United States and North Korea and avoid wasting time bickering are definitely tilted toward Washington. In a November press conference, ROK ambassador to the United States, Sung-joo Han stated, "if North Korea only freezes its plutonium nuclear program then South Korea, the United States and Japan cannot compensate Pyongyang since the freeze of its plutonium program was a condition of past agreements." This statement reflects the attitude of the hawks in Washington who are not only concerned about North Korea's plutonium program but also acknowledgment and elimination of its HEU program which they see as necessary for any further discussion on compensation.

Such insistence from both the United States and South Korea is based on a one-sided position. North Korea's responsibility to freeze its plutonium nuclear program was stipulated in past agreements. According to the 1994 Agreed Framework, compensation was to be given for steps taken by the DPRK to freeze its plutonium - based nuclear program. The Roh government will have to concentrate its energy on creating a point of convergence between the issues of the freeze and compensation. In other words, Seoul will have to consider the positions of both countries and seek a "possible compromise" to promote the first step in a comprehensive settlement.

To achieve this, the Roh government will have to induce North Korea to carry out action in three different areas. Ultimately, it is necessary that both sides agree on what is meant by the "complete dismantlement" of the nuclear program, means for inspecting the nuclear freeze, the reentry of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, and the suspension of missile tests and exports. Last December 15th, a spokesman for the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, "If the United States completely accepts our package deal based on simultaneous steps we are ready to answer with a complete dismantlement of our nuclear weapons program as the U.S. wishes." It is also worth noting that North Korea is examining a plan that would allow the reentry of inspection teams into its Yongbyun complex. In addition, at the first round of six-party talks, North Korea expressed its intentions to cease the testing and exporting of missiles if proper conditions are met. If South Korea can positively persuade North Korea on these issues, a foundation could be laid for a possible breakthrough in the second round of talks.

Another important issue related to the nuclear program is the North's "nuclear deterrent" which is its means of self-defense in the event of a preemptive nuclear attack by the United States. Even if the plutonium nuclear program is frozen, from the perspective of "nuclear deterrent," expressions such as "we will no longer make any more nuclear weapons" reflect North Korea's intentions not give up the nuclear weapons or weapons-grade plutonium it already has. This means that in the case of the failure of the six-party talks these nuclear programs can be utilized as a "nuclear deterrent" and if the talks continue they will be used as leverage by the North to draw out the fulfillment of promises from the United States. Of course, the United States will not be happy about this. Therefore it is important to seek a means for resolving this critical issue. A basic approach should be to have North Korea express its intention to abandon its "nuclear deterrent" in a way that is acceptable to the United States.

If the above mentioned concessions are to be the terms for North Korea's freeze of its nuclear program and missile development, measures for compensation need to be considered in response to positive actions from Pyongyang. As means of compensation North Korea has requested that it be taken off the list of terrorism-sponsoring nations, a lifting of political, economic and military sanctions and blockade, and energy assistance through provisions of heavy fuel oil, electricity, etc. Among these conditions, being removed from the list of terrorism-sponsoring nations, the lifting of economic sanctions and energy support are concrete issues while the lifting of political and military sanctions and blockades are both ambiguous and sensitive issues that are likely to become bones of contention. North Korea can press the issue of political and military sanctions and blockades because of the U.S. doctrine of preemptive strike and the latest U.S. operations plans (OPLAN 5026,5030, etc.) outlining scenarios of military action against North Korea, the U.S. led proliferation security initiative (PSI) to prevent the spread of WMD, the strengthening of military power and redeployment of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), and the negative security assurance (NSA) which is the responsibility of countries that possess nuclear weapons. North Korea's demand for the removal of sanctions and the blockade is justified considering its sense of insecurity and U.S. intentions. However, they are not realistic when viewed from the perspective of U.S. broader global strategy which includes Northeast Asia. The direct link between these issues and a security guarantee

for North Korea as a primary condition for resolving the nuclear issue make it an exceedingly complex and difficult matter to solve.

In any effort toward a resolution responses should be bold and difficult issues need to be approached both "indirectly" and "comprehensively." At the talks, the parties should strive to have North Korea taken off the list of terrorism-sponsoring nations and lift economic sanctions as well as provide energy assistance as concrete and feasible means of compensation. With regard to political and military sanctions and blockades, this should be handled in the first phase of a resolution with the United States offering its suggested multilateral written security guarantee with the ultimate outcome of establishing friendly relations between the DPRK and the United States and the DPRK and Japan as well as the completion of full cross recognition and the transformation of the armistice structure into one of peace.

The thorniest issue at the second round of talks is likely to be the HEU program. If the difference in opinion of the U.S. which states that North Korea "has an HEU program and has acknowledged it" and the view expressed by North Korea that "there is no HEU program, it is just a fabricated report" is not minimized, the talks are likely to be plagued by arguing and bickering. Especially with the Bush administration facing accusations over the suspected manipulation of intelligence reports concerning WMD in Iraq, there is now skepticism both domestically and internationally regarding the existence of the alleged HEU program in North Korea. If the HEU program continues to be raised by Washington, it could result in a loss of trust in the administration as the new presidential election nears. However, in the February 3rd edition of the *Washington Post* a Bush administration official made an interesting comment when he said that, "A.Q. Khan has restored our good name." A.Q. Khan, known as Pakistan's "father of nuclear technology," is an eminent nuclear scientist who was revealed to have provided HEU nuclear related technology and more to such countries as Iran, Libya, and North Korea in the mid-nineties. Based on evidence from this report, the United States has gained newfound confidence and is likely to push North Korea on the HEU issue and in turn North Korea is likely to deny the existence of the program, which will further complicate matters for the United States.

In any case, the Roh administration will have to use wisdom to ensure that the HEU issue does not become a stumbling block to solving other smaller issues as its gravity and urgency compared to the plutonium program could cause a breakdown in the talks.

It is worth noting North Korea's suggestion last January to have an expert-level meeting to discuss the formation of a team of U.S. congressmen and various experts to visit North Korea with the goal of laying to rest any further suspicions over the HEU program. Furthermore, in a situation where the accusations of neither side can be confirmed, it would be best to have the countries involved gather together a group of experts to discuss how to deal with the HEU issue. In the end, the Roh government will have to strongly persuade the United States to accept its suggestions. Instead of emphasizing that North Korea "does not have" a HEU program the Roh government must show a willingness at the six-party talks "to put to rest suspicions" over the existence of the HEU program.

Conclusion: Beyond the Second Round of Six-Party Talks

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, if some kind of breakthrough is not visible in this round of six-party talks, continuing confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea or an even worse catastrophe is likely to occur. This is sufficient reason for the Roh government to take a careful and active approach in preparing for this second round of talks.

In order for the six-party talks to be an "opportunity for peace" they will have to establish a set of goals and processes toward achieving those goals. The goals can be summarized as follows: to alleviate the crisis situation on the Korean peninsula by resolving the North Korean nuclear issue with the United States offering a security guarantee, solving the issue of WMD and ballistic missiles to ensure that confrontation between the United States and North Korea does not flare up again, normalization of relations between the DPRK and the United States and the DPRK and Japan to complete the cross recognition, laying a foundation to change the armistice system into a peace system, achieving the full denuclearization of the Northeast Asian region, and the establishment of multilateral security cooperation with the realization of a Northeast Asian security community.

The first phase of a resolution needs to focus on dialogue and negotiations and agreement on the principles for a resolution as a way to achieve some kind of breakthrough. The second phase should concentrate on building trust among the different parties through written agreements and maintaining this trust through the regularization of the six-party talks. The third phase should result in a final agreement

replacing the 1994 Agreed Framework. If the talks are successful, an inter-Korean summit should be arranged to work toward the “consolidation of peace and to expand the foundation for the unification of the two Koreas” and if the talks fail, a summit should be organized to help “alleviate the crisis situation on the Korean peninsula.”