

SIX-PARTY TALKS: A HALF-STEP FORWARD?

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The second round of Six-Party talks, which was held in Beijing from February 25 to 28, can be rated in various ways depending on the type of yardstick one is using. Unlike the first round, held in the same city six months ago, however, this one had led many observers, and most of the participants, to expect some tangible results—some sign of forward movement in the direction of resolving the 16-month-old standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

What is indisputable is that the results of the second round failed to measure up to the expectations of the participants and observers alike. Substantively, the two main antagonists, the U.S. and the DPRK, failed egregiously to narrow their differences, let alone find common ground, however small. In some sense, the gap between them may even have widened.

Stylistically and symbolically, however, the second round appeared to be marginally or, even significantly, better than its predecessor. For talks proceeded in a business-like atmosphere, spawning serious discussions and potentially useful suggestions. Although the goal of adopting a joint statement of some kind proved to be elusive, the parties did agree on a chairman's statement, a slight improvement over the chair's verbal summary that was offered last time. The agreement to hold a third round by the end of June and to set up a working group to prepare for it is something new, thus signaling that at least half a step may have been taken in the long, uncertain journey toward a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

Comparison with the First Round

There were other differences between the two rounds. This one was a day—or half a

day, to be precise—longer than the first round. Additionally, the DPRK delegation had been upgraded: Not only was it headed by Kim Kye Gwan, a vice foreign minister with long experience in negotiating with the U.S. who was more senior than Kim Yong Il, the North's chief delegate last time, but it also included two senior experts on the U.S., Han Song Ryol, the deputy chief of the DPRK's UN mission, and Li Gun, a deputy director-general of the DPRK Foreign Ministry's American affairs bureau. This appeared to suggest Pyongyang's expectation and readiness to engage in serious discussions, rather than merely air its views, during the second round.

The talks within talks, that is to say, bilateral meetings, were longer and a bit more substantive than they were during the first round. Whereas, during the first round, the U.S. and North Korean delegations held a meeting on the sidelines that lasted a mere 30 minutes, this time the two sides conducted talks for more than an hour; in addition, U.S. chief delegate James Kelly and Kim Kye Gwan sat next to each other during a banquet, engaging in lengthy conversations. A meeting between Japanese and North Korean delegations lasted 80 minutes, in striking contrast to what happened during the last round, which featured brief encounters only. Substantively, however, neither of these meetings proved to be productive.

Another development that is new pertains to the North Korean decision to issue a statement to the press on the second day of the Beijing talks accusing the U.S. of impeding progress with a “stale” hard-line—meaning the U.S. demand for a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of the North's nuclear weapons programs. Such North Korean behavior in the middle of the second round contrasted with an upbeat interim assessment emanating from Washington. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell reportedly told the U.S. Senate Budget Committee that “there's a promising attitude emerging from [the Beijing talks], and hopefully we can move in the right direction there.”¹

¹ “North Korea Says U.S. Is Stalling Nuclear Talks,” New York Times, February 26, 2004.

The North Korean behavior may have reflected its frustration over the U.S.'s rejection of the North's offer to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for compensation, including the resumption of delivery of heavy fuel oil and the removal of the DPRK from the U.S. State Department's list of terrorism-sponsoring states. Such "freeze for compensation" would, according to the North, be but a first step in the eventual dismantlement of its nuclear program.

Gains and Losses

What did the U.S. gain from the second round? Powell stuck to his interim assessment after the Beijing talks ended. In his words, "We haven't gotten where we need to be but what I am especially pleased about is that we have institutionalized now the process with working groups and we're already getting ready for the next meeting."² President Bush was also reported to have given an upbeat assessment to ROK Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon. Among others, Bush cited giving the North a clear and firm message from all of the participating states that the North must dismantle its nuclear weapons programs in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible way and the publication of a document embodying agreement among all six parties for the first time.³

The State Department's official assessment notes that "this round of talks made progress on a regularized process for the peaceful and diplomatic resolution of [the North Korean nuclear] issue," adding that "we worked closely with our partners in the talks and were pleased with the high degree of cooperation among us."⁴

² Barry Schweid, "Powell Upbeat on Nuke Talks With N. Korea," Washington Post, March 2, 2004.

³ "Bush `pukhak p' yonghwa haegyol chasingam kakke toetta' Ban Ki-moon oegyo wa myondam" [Bush: "I Have Confidence That North Korean Nuclear Issue Will Be Resolved Peacefully" Meeting With Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon], Chosun ilbo, March 3, 2004. What Bush characterized as a "document," namely, the chairman's statement issued at the conclusion of the second round, is non-binding, even though it was based on an agreement by all six parties and in writing.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, Six-Party Talks on the North Korean Nuclear Program,

Actually, however, either Washington's gains were eclipsed by losses or the two canceled each other out. Two possible gains may have been, one, getting a chance to test the North's intentions and two, gaining time to keep the standoff from escalating to a dangerous level. With respect to the first, two developments helped to bolster the hypothesis that the North is unlikely to give up its nuclear deterrent or leverage. One is its adamant denial of the existence of a second nuclear weapons program utilizing highly-enriched uranium (HEU). Since such a program would be easier to hide than the already exposed plutonium-based program, the North may be determined to hang on to it. Only an intrusive inspection regime requiring the North's full cooperation would enable outsiders, even if they are experienced professionals, to detect an HEU program as a prelude its complete dismantlement. Kelly reportedly rejected Kim Kye Gwan's demand to see proof of the North's HEU program, citing the ease with which the HEU program can be hidden. Kelly told Kim that disclosure of the proof in U.S. possession would only make it easier for the North to hide the program.⁵

The other development is the North's introduction of a new distinction between its military and civilian nuclear programs, coupled with its insistence that "it would continue to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, like generating electricity."⁶ This may be either Pyongyang's tactic to enhance its bargaining leverage or an indication of its determination not to give up its nuclear deterrent or capability to develop one.

The most important thing the North has gained may well be time, for as long as Six-Party talks continue, albeit intermittently, the U.S. and its allies are unlikely to resort to coercive measures, which may range from economic sanctions to "surgical" air strikes.

Press Statement, Richard Boucher, Spokesman (Washington, DC: February 28, 2004), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2004/29989pf.htm>

⁵ "Kelly `Puk uranium purogram chunggo yogu" [Kelly "North Demands Proof of Uranium Program], Chosun ilbo, March 3, 2004.

⁶ Joseph Kahn, "North Korea Talks Continue, But Nuclear Pact Is Unlikely," New York Times, February 28, 2004.

The North can use the time thus gained to fortify its nuclear deterrent, whether it be nuclear material, such as weapons-grade plutonium, or actual nuclear weapons.

Although no tangible results materialized, the opportunity to engage in substantive bilateral discussions with the U.S. could be counted as a gain of sorts for the North. Also notable is the emergence of an informal coalition supportive of an approach that is markedly more beneficial to the North than that advocated by the U.S. and Japan. South Korea unveiled a variant of “freeze for compensation,” which was embraced by China and Russia. Although the U.S. and Japan expressed, perhaps grudgingly, their “understanding and support,” however, both made it clear that they would not participate in such a scheme.

On the negative side, the North demonstrated to all of its co-participants in the Beijing talks its unbending hard line and its rejection of the CVID formula. In so doing, Pyongyang must surely have disappointed, if not irked, Beijing, its only military ally and main source of fuel and food aid, which had worked so hard to make the second round a success.

China’s role in the second round was as pivotal as it was in the first. The U.S. government thus officially thanked “the Chinese government for not only participating fully in the talks, but also for its exemplary diplomatic efforts in organizing and hosting the talks.”⁷ China’s “diplomatic efforts” included the visit of a state delegation led by Wu Bangguo, ranked second in the Chinese Communist Party after Hu Jintao, to Pyongyang in October 2003, during which unspecified economic assistance was offered.⁸ In February 2004 China reportedly agreed to “build a bottle manufacturing plant in North Korea in honor of [Chairman] Kim Jong Il’s birthday as a way to get the North to come to a new round of talks.”⁹

⁷ U.S. Department of State, Six-Party Talks on North Korean Nuclear Program.

⁸ B. C. Koh, “Six-Party Talks: The Last Chance for Peace?” *East Asia Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Winter 2003), p. 15.

⁹ Steven R. Weisman and David E. Sanger, “North Korea Offered Aid if It Pledges

Determined to make the second round more productive than its predecessor, China tried very hard to convince the other parties in the six-party process to find sufficient common ground to be able to produce a joint statement. As Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the head of the Chinese delegation at the talks, put it, “we come to the talks to expand our common ground, not to highlight our differences; to settle problems, not to escalate conflict.”¹⁰

China’s valiant effort to forge a consensus, however, were in vain, and the plan to issue a chairman’s statement, too, was almost torpedoed due to the North’s last-minute insistence on inserting “a clause stating that ‘differences remained’ ..into an article trumpeting that participants ‘enhanced their understanding of each other’s positions.’” After initially objecting to the North’s proposal, the U.S. delegation accepted it to prevent the talks from collapsing altogether, which, the U.S. and other delegations feared, “would seriously embarrass China.”¹¹

It is understandable that China officially put a positive spin on all this. In a speech at the closing ceremony, which was delayed for three hours due to the haggling over the language of the chairman’s statement, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing hailed the “consensus on setting up a working group and the next round of talks.” Li saw “the importance of the second-round” in the occurrence of “substantial dialogue,” which he said marked “a big step forward toward the realization of the final goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.” “Some people may think,” Li added, “that not enough progress was made, and the talks did not go fast enough, but in my opinion, the achievements were hard-won and worth valuing since this round of talks had started when mutual

Nuclear Curb,” New York Times, February 26, 2004.

¹⁰ “Six-Party Talks See ‘Certain Consensus,” China View: www.chinaview.cn , February 25, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2004-02-25/content_1332002.htm

¹¹ Taro Karasaki, “Talks End With Little Headway Made,” Asahi.com, March 1, 2004, <http://www.asahi.com/english/politics/TKY200403010147.html>

trust was lacking among relevant sides and their differences were growing.”¹²

It is worth noting that China disagrees with the U.S. on the HEU issue. Although Abdul Qadeer Khan, the “father” of Pakistan’s nuclear program, has been widely reported as having acknowledged selling HEU technology to North Korea, in his televised confession in early February, Khan “didn’t name any specific countries.” The Pakistani government, moreover, officially denied “delivering nuclear technology to North Korea in exchange for missiles.”¹³

Although Japan hoped to make some headway, however, small, in breaking the impasse over the abduction issue, the only thing it can count as a plus on that issue is the realization of bilateral talks with the North on the sidelines of the main conference in Beijing. Japan’s chief delegate, Yabunaka Mitoji, reiterated to Kim Kye Gwan “Japan’s position that issues of contention, including the abductions, must be resolved before ties are normalized and aid can be sent to North Korea.”¹⁴ The inclusion of vague language implying the abduction issue in the chairman’s statement may also be counted as a gain of sorts. The six parties, the statement noted, “agreed to take coordinated steps to address the nuclear issue and *address the related concerns*.”¹⁵ Throughout the second round, Japan flaunted its solidarity with the U.S.; the two were, in fact, interchangeable on all issues, large and small. As he did during the first round, Kelly took pains to mention the abduction issue in his speech at the main conference.

As already noted, Russia joined China in supporting South Korea’s proposal to provide energy assistance to the North on condition that the North commits itself to freezing its

¹² “Six-Party Talks Conclude As Disagreement Exist,” People’s Daily, February 28, 2004, http://english.peopledaily.com./200402/28/print2004028_136086...

¹³ George Gedda, “China, U.S. Differ Over N. Korea Weapons,” Washington Post, February 6, 2004; Burt Herman, “Pakistan Denies Sending Nukes to N. Korea,” *ibid*, February 9, 2004.

¹⁴ Taro Karasaki, “Analysis: Kim’s Abduction Statement Puzzles Tokyo,” Asahi.com, February 27, 2004, <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200402270159.html>

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Chairman’s Statement for the Second Round of Six-Party Talks (Beijing: February 28, 2004). Italics added.

nuclear facilities as a first step toward their eventual dismantlement. Russia and China offered to join Seoul in providing the assistance.

South Korea, while maintaining the framework of both trilateral cooperation involving the U.S. and Japan and bilateral cooperation with the U.S., nonetheless unveiled its own proposals in this round. The much-touted independence in foreign policy was on display.

Prospects

Since the chairman's statement embodies not legally-binding obligations but political commitments of the six parties and since the track records of the main antagonists in adhering to agreements of even legally binding nature are far from exemplary, whether the key provisions in the February 28, 2004 statement will be implemented remains to be seen.

There are nonetheless compelling practical considerations that make six-party talks useful to all the participating states. None of them can afford an escalation of the standoff, which may lead ineluctably to a catastrophic conflict on the Korean Peninsula. One can only hope, therefore, that China, the rising economic power, that has catapulted itself to the center stage of diplomacy in this part of the world, will continue to exercise its diplomatic skills and considerable leverage, especially over the North, to help the main antagonists to narrow their differences and find common ground.

When and if it has collected incontrovertible or at least sufficiently convincing proof of the North's HEU program, the United States should share such evidence with China. Notwithstanding its status as the only country that has an ongoing military alliance with the North, China has a high stake in nuclear nonproliferation and in leading the six-party process to a successful conclusion; hence it can be relied upon not to share the evidence with Pyongyang, if Washington truly believes that doing so will help the North

to hide its HEU program more effectively.

It is worth noting that, according to Kelly, the “North Koreans did agree for the first time to allow the U.S. claims about uranium bomb development to be a legitimate part of the agenda for future discussions.”¹⁶ Kelly also said that the North Korean “denials [of an HEU program] were less vociferous than in the past.”¹⁷

In sum, six-party talks are still alive, and that is good news for all concerned, including the North. Failure to implement the two key provisions in the chairman’s statement — namely, the formation of a working group and the convening of a third round by the end of June — may, however, signal the beginning of the end of the multilateral process. One hopes that common sense and reason will ultimately prevail, thus paving the way for a nuclear weapons -free Korean Peninsula.

¹⁶ George Gedda, “N. Korea Won’t Acknowledge Uranium Program,” Washington Post, March 3, 2004.

¹⁷ David E. Sanger, “Bush Envoy Briefs Panel After Talks on A-Bombs,” New York Times, March 3, 2004.