

## **Distant Ties--Iraq and the Six-party Talks**

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China's persistence is sustaining the six-party diplomatic process. At the end of April, China scored another success when it announced that six-party "working group talks" will convene in Beijing on May 12. One month earlier, the situation looked bleak. February's six-party talks seemed destined to accomplish nothing. But China again intervened and rallied support for "working group" talks, plus another plenary session of the six-party talks in June. Ever since, Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington have been engaged in quiet, albeit intense diplomacy.

All the concerned capitals have welcomed the news about the working level talks. After all, they prefer a "peaceful diplomatic" solution. But the rigid positions of Washington and Pyongyang continue to obstruct progress. So far, the only concrete accomplishment since February's round of six-party talks has been more diplomatic chatter. Nevertheless, tensions in Northeast Asia remain subdued and attention remains focused on diplomacy rather than confrontational saber rattling.

Meanwhile, the deadly drama that now consumes Iraq seems completely unrelated to developments in Northeast Asia. Actually, however, the insurgency in Iraq is having a significant, albeit subtle influence on the priorities and strategies of all the governments involved in the six-party talks. President George W. Bush created this linkage when he named Iraq and North Korea, along with Libya and Iran, as members of an "axis of evil." In doing so, he declared that the United States' priority global mission is to secure the United States and the world from these evil regimes, their weapons of mass destruction and their alleged championing of terrorism. As recently as April 19, 2004, in a speech to the National Defense University in Washington, Bush reaffirmed his determination to dismember the "axis of evil," either through diplomacy or military action.

### **"Libyan" or "Iraqi" Options**

But events in Iraq are hindering Bush's efforts to match his rhetoric with action. During February's six-party talks in Beijing, President Bush reportedly vented his frustration with Pyongyang by ordering the US delegation to warn North Korea that his administration is running out of patience. Vice President Dick Cheney reiterated this to China's leaders during his mid-April visit to Beijing. In parallel "off the record"

presentations in Washington, ranking Bush administration officials have said that Pyongyang has only two options. Either it pursues the “Libyan solution” or the U.S. will deploy its “Iraqi” option. In other words, Pyongyang must accept, without precondition or any concessions, “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of all of its nuclear programs. Otherwise, Pyongyang will risk war with the United States.

### **“Iraqi Option” Deferred, Temporarily**

Fortunately for all the concerned parties, parallel developments are keeping Washington and Pyongyang focused on diplomacy. China, with help from Seoul and Moscow, continues to nudge Kim Jong Il toward the realization that a diplomatic solution, more than a nuclear arsenal, will secure his regime’s survival. Beijing’s effort in this regard was quite evident during Kim Jong Il’s mid-April surprise visit to Beijing. Meanwhile, Seoul has continued both its policy of economic cooperation with Pyongyang and linkage of the aid’s continuation to North Korea’s ultimate nuclear disarmament. Similarly, Tokyo continues to quietly tell Pyongyang that it can expect substantial economic aid, but only after it has released the family members of the abducted Japanese citizens and accepted CVID.

### **Washington Shifts Toward Multilateralism**

Several developments in recent months have compelled President Bush to lean more toward multilateralism and away from his earlier confidence in unilateralism. This could have significant and positive consequences for the six-party talks and long term prospects for peace in Northeast Asia.

Prior to his March 2003 invasion of Iraq, a confident Bush demonstrated impatience with multilateralism. He sternly criticized a cautious United Nations, thorough International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and hesitant European allies. Bush then confidently declared that the United States would “go it alone in Iraq, if necessary .”. Putting his full trust in U.S. military might, Bush moved decisively to topple Iraq’s despot Saddam Hussein and then set out to find his alleged weapons of mass destruction. At that time, North Korea appeared to be next on Bush’s “hit” list of “axis of evil” members that he intended to transform and disarm. Also, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared that the United States was capable of asserting its military option simultaneously in the Middle East and elsewhere.

But subsequent developments in Iraq and Afghanistan have altered Bush’s priorities and strategy. The Bush administration is scrambling now to halt the erosion of United States

influence around the world, particularly in the Middle East. His unilateralism, despite overwhelming military superiority, has failed to achieve quick victory and rally public support in Iraq. An additional impetus is the United States' inability to capture Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The insurgency in Iraq, pursuit in Afghanistan and commitments elsewhere because of the global war on terrorism have scattered U.S. military might and prevented the Pentagon from regrouping U.S. military forces. This, more than any verbal security assurances, is restraining the United States from reconstituting its "military" or "Iraqi" option in Northeast Asia.

At the same time, the Bush administration faces a sustained and growing chorus of domestic political criticism in Washington and across the United States. The Bush administration's credibility is being challenged because of the administration's failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, revelations about its policy priorities prior to the "9/11" terrorist attacks, and the intensifying Iraqi opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq. The Democratic Party is striving to make political capital from the Bush administration's failure to match its rhetoric with action. At the same time, the U.S. budget, like U.S. military forces, is in disarray.

The Bush administration has belatedly discovered the value of multilateralism. In the Middle East, it is striving, with mixed results, to expand the U.S.-led military coalition and to induce the United Nations to assume a more active role in Iraq's reconstruction. The Iraqi insurgents, however, have badly shaken the coalition of foreign troops, construction contractors and humanitarian relief workers. In this regard, the firmness of the British, Japanese and South Korean commitments of troops and funds has been crucial. The United Kingdom's commitment is, by far, the largest. But Japan has pledged substantial amounts of aid and sent 600 troops, its first dispatch of combat troops abroad since the end of World War II. South Korea has sent the second largest, after the United Kingdom, contingent of troops (3,700) and also pledged an impressive amount of aid.

Other factors are limiting the extent to which the Bush administration can expect its allies to expand their commitment to his Iraqi campaign. The insurgency has made membership in the U.S.-led coalition a political liability in many democracies, including those in South Korea and Japan. Spaniards recently ousted the prime minister who had dispatched troops to Iraq and replaced him with the candidate who, beginning a year ago campaigned on a promise to bring the troops home. Prime Minister Tony Blair has faced, and survived, continuous criticism at home because of his commitment to the U.S.-led effort in Iraq. The leaders of Italy and Poland have demonstrated similar resolve. So too have South Korea's president and Japan's prime minister.

South Korea's beleaguered President Roh Moo-hyun, remains on a political tight rope in Seoul. His favored political party, the *Uri dang*, won an impressive victory in the April National Assembly elections. The kidnapping of several South Koreans just prior to the election, and the earlier deaths of two South Korean technicians, points to the potential political difficulties of maintaining 3,700 troops in Iraq. South Korea's leading opposition party remains a potent force in the National Assembly and can be counted on to use any South Korean misfortunate in Iraq as the basis for pressing its political offensive against President Roh's uncertain leadership.

Iraq's insurgents also pose a similar, albeit indirect, political threat to Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. One of the most sensitive issues for the Japanese people continues to be North Korea's abduction of its citizens beginning in the late 1970s. Prime Minister Koizumi made a partially successful effort to resolve the issue in 2002. Koizumi subsequently survived the Japanese people's outrage when they learned that several of their citizens had died in North Korea under suspicious circumstances. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il intensified this outrage by not allowing the family members of five previously abducted Japanese citizens to join them in Japan. Similar emotions erupted when terrorists in Iraq took five Japanese citizens hostage and threatened to brutally murder them. Koizumi, much to his credit and the Japanese public's approval, stood fast and refused to give in to the terrorists' demands. There is a lingering threat of future kidnappings and the possibility of casualties among the Japanese who remain in Iraq. The extent to which this might adversely affect the ruling party's prospects in July's Upper House election remains to be seen.

So far Washington has been able to prevent the crumbling of its hastily formed military coalition, but significant problems persist. Prospects for enlarging the coalition appear to be bleak. The United Nations remains hesitant about returning to Iraq, waiting for the security situation to stabilize. France and Germany remain convinced not to become involved militarily. Spain, Honduras and the Dominican Republic have announced their intention to withdraw their troops from the coalition. Some European nations with small contingents in Iraq also are pondering withdrawal.

These developments have taught Bush a keener appreciation of multilateralism. This, combined with his administration's increasing dependence on allies and friends, augers well that Washington will continue to be patient regarding the six-party talks process. As for Bush's "Iraqi option," reference to it now appears, at least for the time being, to be more rhetoric than reality.

## **Ticking Clock**

This is good news not just for Pyongyang, but for all the other concerned capitals, particularly Seoul and Tokyo. No one wants a second Korean War. After all, the price would far exceed the cost of any diplomatic solution. But the clock is ticking. Developments in Iraq and the U.S. presidential election suggest that Pyongyang would be wise to work out a deal now rather than later. President Bush is determined to “stay the course” in Iraq. Reinforcing U.S. resolve is the support of Britain, Japan, South Korea and other U.S. allies. Prospects remain very good that U.S. military might, backed by that of its allies, will eventually prevail over the Iraq insurgency.

At the same time, prospects for President Bush’s reelection remain good. Problems at home and abroad --the economy, insurgency and casualties in Iraq, and budget woes-- worry the Bush administration. But Bush still has six months to deal with these problems before the presidential election. Bush can be expected to confront Kim Jong Il with his “Iraqi” option, if he wins re-election.

Even if Bush were to lose, his apparent democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry, is unlikely to radically alter United States policies toward Iraq and North Korea. Kerry might allow more time and demonstrate more flexibility to achieve a negotiated settlement with Pyongyang. But he has already made clear that he shares Bush’s determination to keep the Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons.

## **Prospects for Peace**

Hopefully, the six-party talks have convinced North Korea that its neighbors, not just the distant United States, insist that Pyongyang reform and give up its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Waiting will not resolve Pyongyang’s dilemma. The longer Pyongyang holds out, the greater the chances that the United States will be able to regroup its military forces, regardless of who is in the White House. But as long as the six-party talks process continues to make progress, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia will be able to keep both the United States and North Korea focused on diplomacy rather than war.

The Bush administration’s experience in Iraq has tempered its previous impulses, particularly regarding its preference for unilateral action and the deployment of military force. The bottom line in Washington, nevertheless, still remains that unless North Korea gives up its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, it will share Iraq’s fate. No one can say for certain how far Pyongyang is willing to press Washington for concessions. It

seems reasonable to assume, however, that North Korea joined the six-party talks because it, like its neighbors, prefers a diplomatic solution to one of sharing Iraq's experience. If anything, Bush's increasing reliance on multilateralism and patience with diplomacy should enhance prospects for an eventual peaceful solution in Northeast Asia. But Pyongyang would do well not to test Washington's patience.