

North Korea's Return to six-party talks, and South Korea's Corresponding Strategy

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It looks as if a fourth round of six-party talks will open in Beijing around the 27th of this month. Domestic and international attention has mounted over the last thirteen months since the previous round. North Korea announced its return, effectively giving in on its demands for bilateral talks with the United States. This resumption of six-way talks validates the perseverance and efforts of the U.S., China, and both Koreas. Despite the hard-line position of the neo-conservative Bush administration, Washington never wavered from its policy of finding a peaceful resolution through diplomacy, and despite the opposition from hard nosed military leaders in the DPRK, Kim Jong Il never discarded the six-party framework. China also stepped up to play the role of a honest broker, arbitrating between the U.S. and North Korea each time they faced off on an issue. Particularly, since the end of last year, South Korea has put forth much efforts, playing an active and a positive role instead of being a middleman. President Roh Moo Hyun has made his rounds in the international society, calling for a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

Lead-up to Talks

By holding a summit meeting with the U.S., President Rho was able to pacify the hard-line approach of America's that was causing tensions on the Korean peninsula. Through persistent persuasion, President Bush was convinced to refer to Kim Jong Il as "Mr. Kim" and to refer to North Korea as a "sovereign nation," thus paving the way for contact between the two countries to begin. Minister of Unification Chung Dong-

Young also played a positive role, leading a special envoy to North Korea where he explained to Kim Jong Il the concerns of the international community, and at the same time laid out South Korea's "important offer," thus generating a shift in the North's attitude. Since the beginning of inter-Korean economic cooperation, food aid to the North has been both politically and socially difficult, but it appears that even more aid will be given in the future.

U.S.-DPRK Relations

North Korea is giving some indication of its willingness to pursue a peaceful resolution of nuclear issues by returning to the fourth round of talks. North Korea's decisions and actions show what sort of mindset is being adopted in Pyongyang. The U.S. and DPRK chief representatives met and pounded out an agreement to return to the six-party talks. The U.S. representative recognized the North's sovereignty and agreed to meet bilaterally within the framework of the six-party talks, thus assuring that the resolution of the North's nuclear issue is one to be brought about jointly by the U.S. and DPRK. Before Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice made her recent trip to China, South Korea, and Japan, she stated that the purpose of her trip was not about how to pressure or sanction the North, but more about working out a coordinated negotiating plan.

Chinese Role

According to Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan, who spoke after recently returning from Pyongyang, Chinese pressures along with its support for the North's autonomy seem to have been decisive and leading factors, as well. While China has been the honest broker with respect to decision making process and agreements between the U.S. and North Korea, it looks as if it will continue to ally itself with the North, supporting the nation in the upcoming round of talks.

The North's Announcement

Kim Jong Il's announcement to the South Korean special envoy on June 17th that the North was prepared to return to six-party talks in July can, on one hand, be seen as an attempt by the North to gain the trust of South Korea and the international community. On the other hand, it can also be viewed as the result of pressures on the United States.

It has also been alleged that the contents of the talk were made available to the South Korean public a short time before the official announcement was made. If this is true, it is anyone's guess as to whether it was Washington or Pyongyang who leaked the news. If the news was passed by a North Korean representative at the conference on inter-Korean economic cooperation, then it is indeed a sign of trust, and a positive sign for inter-Korean relations and resolution of the North's nuclear issue.

North Korea's Efforts

North Korea is giving off the impression that it supports the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. In the North, work is underway to convince the nation that Kim Il Sung's dying words were to push for a nuclear free peninsula. If this is the case, then it appears that North Korea has already begun to convince the military and the people of the need to solve the nuclear issue. It also appears that Washington has recently grown more flexible. In three-party talks, the state department staff have laid out 'proposals' rather than 'demands' and have stated that the U.S. is willing to discuss any proposals that North Korea has, as well.

Good Opportunities Lie Ahead

This fourth round of six-party talks is important, but it is also a good opportunity.

Participating countries are making very prudent responses to one another. Washington and Beijing have lowered their expectations, while North Korea has discretely shown that it expects substantial progress to be made. If all of the countries support “a peaceful and diplomatic resolution on the North Korean nuclear issue” and work earnestly through “give and take” discussions to reach an agreement, then this really could be the beginning of the end of this issue. South Korea’s positive and original strategy is necessary now more than ever. South Korea, in close agreement with the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia, is approaching the North with an “important proposal” to transmit electricity across the border, along with the current framework of step-by-step reciprocal actions, and this is the kind of effort that is necessary.

The Nature of Multilateral Talks

The six-party talks are multilateral talks. On the positive side, they are an opportunity to express individual opinions and at the same time to listen to the opinions and responses of those across the table. The downside is that the time necessary to solve the wide range of issues is considerably drawn out. Up until now, six-party talks have focused on working-level and all-inclusive talks. In order to make these a little more productive, security guarantees should be dealt with by the political side, compensation and economic cooperation by the economic side, nuclear inspections and verification by the technical side, etc. South Korea needs to strive to find its place in this equation for resolution. At the very least, Seoul cannot afford to forget the importance of supporting the momentum of the six-party talks.

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