

PROSPECTS FOR SIX-PARTY TALKS

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The prospects for breaking the impasse in six-party talks appeared to improve measurably on June 17, when North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong Il told South Korean unification minister Chung Dong Young in Pyongyang that the North would be willing to return to the long-stalled talks provided certain conditions were met. In a strict sense, this was not entirely new. For the North had expressed its commitment to the six-party process as part of its "bombshell" declaration on February 10 that it was a nuclear-weapons state. That commitment was reaffirmed on June 6 during a meeting in New York between Ambassador Joseph DeTrani, the U.S. special envoy for six-party talks, and Ambassador Pak Gil Yon, the DPRK permanent representative to the United Nations.

What was significant nonetheless was that for the first time Kim Jong Il had personally made the commitment. What specifically did he tell Chung? What are the chances that this development will pave the way for the resumption of the six-party talks? And what can one expect to see in a new round of the talks, should it materialize?

Kim-Chung Meeting

The meeting between Kim Jong Il and Chung Dong Young marked the first time in more than three years that the North Korean leader had met a high-ranking South Korean official. The meeting lasted two and a half hours, and when a lunch to which other members of the South Korean delegation to the joint celebration of the fifth inter-Korean summit were also invited is counted, Chung had spent nearly five hours with Kim Jong Il.

The salient aspects of the meeting, as reported by Chung, were the following. Most important, Kim told Chung that the North would be prepared to return to six-party talks as early as next month provided the U.S. "recognizes us as a partner and treats us with respect." Kim hastened to add, however, that further consultations with the U.S. would be required on that issue.¹

Kim also said that he had a positive impression of the June 10 summit meeting between U.S. president George W. Bush and ROK president Roh Moo Hyun, during which the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to diplomacy and the six-party talks in dealing with the nuclear issue. Kim, however, would continue to “watch U.S. behavior.” Should the nuclear issue be resolved, Kim said, his country would rejoin the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and accept inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency and others.² “There is no reason to keep nuclear weapons, not even one,” Kim told Chung, “I will open it all. They can come and see.”³

Chung, who conveyed President Roh’s verbal message to Kim, asked Kim about President Bush’s use of the term, “Mr. Kim,” in reference to the North Korean leader, which occurred during a joint press conference following the Roh-Bush summit on June 10. It marked the second time in two weeks that Bush had done so. Chung reported that Kim laughed and then asked, “Should I then call him, “His excellency, President Bush”?” Kim added that he had no reason to think bad of President Bush. He also recounted that both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Juninchi had told him that Bush is “an interesting man, a good man, who could have a good conversation.” According to Chung, Kim “has thought highly of the United States since President Bill Clinton was in office, stressing the importance of respecting the negotiating partner.”⁴

Kim also told Chung that should the U.S. establish diplomatic relations with the DPRK, the North would be willing to discard its “long-range and inter-continental ballistic missiles, only maintaining some missiles which normal states deploy.”⁵

Also noteworthy is Kim’s statement that he considered the 1992 joint North-South declaration on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as an agreement that was still in force, because it was part of the late President Kim Il Sung’s legacy.⁶ Chung apparently did not ask, nor did Kim clarify, how one can explain the contradiction between the continuing efficacy of the joint declaration on the one hand and the North’s covert pursuit of a highly-enriched uranium (HEU)-based nuclear weapons program and open admission of having made nuclear weapons on the other.

Other aspects of the Kim-Chung meeting that did not pertain to the nuclear issue included Kim’s promise to consider the resumption of general officers’ talks, a reunion of separated family members both in person and through video images, to send a delegation including “heavy-weight” people to a joint celebration of the 60th anniversary of Korea’s

liberation from Japanese colonial rule scheduled to be held in Seoul in mid-August, and to invite former president Kim Dae Jung to visit the North in the near future.⁷

An Assessment

How can one explain the development outlined above? A plausible conjecture is that the North may have made a strategic decision to return to the six-party talks. On February 10, when it publicly declared for the first time that it had “manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defense” and would “suspend indefinitely” its participation in six-party talks, it took pains to leave the door open for a return to the multilateral negotiating table. In its words, the suspension of its participation in six-party talks would remain in effect until “we have recognized that there is justification [*myongbun*] for us to return to them and conditions and an atmosphere have been created to expect positive results from the talks.”⁸

Have the “conditions and an atmosphere,” then, been created to justify the North’s return to the talks? A key factor may well be the North’s ever-worsening food situation. A sharp decline in international humanitarian aid is not unrelated to Pyongyang’s intransigence on the nuclear issue, which its leadership is bound to have realized. More generous aid from the South, which has emerged as the second most important source of aid and trade for the North after China, may also hinge on the North’s cooperative behavior. A day after the Kim-Chung meeting, the North Korean Red Cross telephoned its South Korean counterpart requesting an additional 150,000 tons of fertilizer; the South had just completed its shipment of 200,000 tons of fertilizer to the North.⁹ During the 15th round of the inter-Korean minister-level meeting held in Seoul from June 21 to 24, the North requested a rice aid of 400,000 tons, a request the South accepted.¹⁰

Nor can the North be oblivious to the concerns of its only ally and number one benefactor, China. Although it has been careful not to push the North too far, China has nonetheless made it plain that de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, for which six-party talks are viewed as indispensable, is a top priority. The North, moreover, may need to make some good faith effort before Chinese president Jiang Zemin visits Pyongyang in the near future, perhaps as early as next month.

As far as the U.S. is concerned, the North probably knows that it will never get what it wants—namely, a retraction of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s designation of North Korea as an “outpost of tyranny.” Such request had actually been made during the

DeTrani-Pak Gil Yon meeting on June 6. On June 20 a high-ranking diplomat at the DPRK mission to the United Nations who wished remain anonymous told *Yonhap News Agency* that the North would be willing to construe restraint on the part of the U.S.—notably, refraining from using the same expression again and from making other provocative statements vis-à-vis the North—as a “retraction of sorts.”¹¹ Rice’s assurances that the U.S. regards the DPRK as a sovereign state and that the U.S. has no intention of attacking the North were positive developments, as were Bush’s use of what the North regards as an honorific term, “Mr. Kim Jong Il.”

On June 20, however, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobrianski referred to North Korea as an “outpost of tyranny” at a seminar in Washington, D.C. This prompted South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon to urge the U.S. to exercise restraint, a request Secretary of State Rice agreed to “take into account.” She reportedly told Ban, however, that “North Korea should not take the comments of low-level U.S. officials too seriously, stressing that the opinions of Bush and herself are what count.”¹²

The North and the U.S. have kept their “New York channels” open; from August 2004 to June 2005 DeTrani and Pak Gil Yon held five meetings.¹³ These channels may need to be utilized if the opportunity to break the impasse in six-party talks is to be seized upon. The U.S. has adhered to the position that it will not offer any inducements to the North for a return to the talks.

During the joint press conference on June 10, for example, President Bush said: “President [Roh] and I both agree the six-party talks are essential to saying to Mr. Kim Jong Il that he ought to give up his weapons. We’re making it very clear to him that the way to join the community of nations is to listen to China and South Korea and Japan and Russia—and the United States—and that is to give up nuclear weapons... We laid out a way forward last June that is a reasonable proposal and we’re still awaiting the answer to that proposal.”¹⁴

The proposal to which Bush referred was unveiled at the third round of the six-party talks, held in Beijing from June 23 to 26. It called on the North to (1) “fully disclose its nuclear activities,” (2) “submit to inspections,” and (3) “pledge to begin eliminating nuclear programs after a ‘preparatory period’ of three months.” In return for all this, the North “would receive shipments of heavy fuel oil to meet its energy needs, gain a ‘provisional security guarantee’ from the United States and see the lifting of some sanctions.”¹⁵

Should the North decide to return to the talks, then, it should be prepared to discuss the preceding proposal. As Adam Ereli, deputy spokesman of the U.S. State Department put it, “the real issue for us is getting back to the talks; but more than that, engaging seriously and substantively on our proposal and on discussions to end ...North Korea’s nuclear program.”¹⁶

Should the North fail to show flexibility, however, the mere resumption of talks may not be enough. The North, for example, must ultimately acknowledge the existence of an HEU program, either explicitly or implicitly. The U.S. and its allies—the ROK and Japan—will not settle for anything less than a complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantling of the North’s nuclear weapons program(s).

In short, there is still a long way to go. The very first step, nonetheless, remains the resumption of the stalled six-party talks. Kim Jong Il’s insistence that the U.S. needs to treat the DPRK with respect and as a partner cannot be brushed aside as a mere “rhetoric.” For his and his regime’s sense of insecurity is a pivotal factor in the equation, which needs to be addressed if any headway is to be made. As a *Korea Herald* editorial put it, “North Korea is not demanding too much, given U.S. President George Bush’s earlier reference to post-nuclear crisis transition to ‘more normal relations’ with North Korea.” “U.S. negotiators will do well to keep in mind,” the editorial continued, “that it is not just substance but a gesture of goodwill that counts in engaging North Korea.”¹⁷

The U.S., however, has shown a mixed reaction thus far. On June 20, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, who will be the U.S. chief representative at six-party talks, characterized the Kim-Chung meeting as a positive and important development, indicating a readiness by the U.S. to treat North Korea as an equal partner. In his words, “when we begin these [nuclear] negotiations, we will conduct them in an attitude of mutual respect to all the parties and also with the sense of equality that a good negotiator should have.”¹⁸

On the same day, however, Hill’s boss, Secretary of State Rice told *Cable Network News (CNN)* in an interview from Jerusalem that the North’s insistence on “respect” was an “excuse to avoid pressure” over its nuclear weapons program. In her words, “the North Koreans love to make excuses for why they can’t come to the [talks]...The reason they don’t want to come to the six-party talks is they don’t like facing China and Russia and Japan and South Korea and the United States telling them in a concerted fashion that it’s time to get rid of their nuclear weapons.” “The North Koreans have been told by their

neighbors and by the international community,” Rice continued, “that the only way that they gain respect that they say they want, the only way that they gain some help with their terrible economic situation is to make a strategic choice to give up their nuclear weapons and come to the six-party talks.”¹⁹

Two days later the Bush administration announced that it would send 50,000 tons of food to the North through the World Food Program. This would be the same amount of U.S. food aid to the North as last year. In 2003, the amount was 100,000 tons.²⁰ Although the U.S. insisted that the decision was based solely on humanitarian considerations, the timing of the announcement was most probably influenced by Kim Jong Il’s June 17 remarks.

In sum, as far as the U.S. is concerned, the ball is in North Korea’s court. As already noted, however, it will not suffice for the North merely to return to the talks. The North must make a strategic decision to truly give up its nuclear weapons programs. Given its track record, Kim Jong Il’s words alone will not convince anyone that the North will indeed make such a decision. The results of the just-concluded inter-Korean minister-level talks suggest nonetheless that the North may be serious about its professed desire to break the impasse in the nuclear standoff. Although no real progress was made on the nuclear issue—with the North Korean chief delegate Kwon Ho Ung merely reiterating the principles enunciated by Kim Jong Il on June 17—the two sides reached a wide-ranging agreements covering the whole gamut of issues, from the resumption of general-level military talks to the reunion of separated family members.

A proposal worth noting—even though its feasibility is rather low—is one unveiled on June 22 by Donald Gregg, the former U.S. ambassador to Seoul, and Don Oberdorfer, former diplomatic correspondent for *The Washington Post* and currently journalist-in residence at Johns Hopkins University. They suggest that “President Bush, after touching base with our Asian partners...communicate directly with Kim Jong Il to follow up on his remarks.” Bush, they add, “might consider offering to send Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill and Ambassador Joseph DeTrani to Pyongyang to prepare for a visit to Kim by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The purpose would be to explore the policies behind Kim’s words to determine whether practical arrangements can be made, subject to approval by our partners in the six-nation talks, to end the dangerous North Korean nuclear program.”²¹

They reveal for the first time that in November 2002 they delivered a “written personal message from Kim [Jong Il] to Bush,” given to them during their visit to Pyongyang. In it Kim wrote: “If the United States recognizes our sovereignty and assures non-aggression, it is our view that we should be able to find a way to resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century.” Kim added: “If the United States makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly.” “Then deep in secret planning and a campaign of persuasion for the invasion of Iraq, the [Bush] administration spurned engagement with North Korea,” Gregg and Oberdorfer write.²²

As noted, however, it appears unlikely that the Bush administration will offer any significant inducements to the North, much less “make a bold decision.” The least it can do, nonetheless, is to exercise restraint so as not to provoke the North or provide an excuse for Pyongyang to close the window of opportunity it has opened. The road ahead, in other words, is not only long but bumpy as well.

¹ *Chosun ilbo*, June 18, 2005; Norimitsu Onish, “North Korea’s Leader Says He’s Ready To Resume Talks to End Nuclear Standoff,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2005, p. A5.

² *Joongang ilbo*, June 18, 2005.

³ Joohee Cho, “N. Korea’s Kim Says He’ll Talk if U.S. Gives Respect,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 2005, p. A14.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Joo Sang-min, “Pyongyang Will Abolish Missiles If U.S. Establishes Diplomatic Ties,” *Korea Herald*, June 21, 2005.

⁶ *Joongang ilbo*, June 18, 2005.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ B. C. Koh, “North Korea’s ‘Bombshell’ Declaration,” *IFES Forum*, March 2, 2005, on line at <http://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr/eng>

⁹ “Kita Chosen, Kankoku ni hiryo 15 manton no hiryo tsuika shien yosei” [North Korea Asks ROK to Provide an Additional 150,000 tons of Fertilizer,” *Asahi shinbun*, June 20, 2005, on line at <http://www.asahi.com/international/update/0620/004.html>

¹⁰ Ryu Jin, “Koreas Agree on Nuclear-free Peninsula,” *Korea Times*, June 24, 2005.

¹¹ *Chosun ilbo*, June 21, 2005.

¹² Reuben Stains, “U.S. Coaxes Pyongyang Back to Nuclear Talks,” *Korea Times*, June 23, 2005.

¹³ U. S. Department of State, *Dealing With North Korea’s Nuclear Programs*, Christopher R. Hill, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Washington, DC: June 14, 2005), on line at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/ris/rm/2005/47875.htm>

¹⁴ *Idem*, *President Welcomes South Korean President Roh to the White House*, President Bush, President Roh, The Overal Office (Washington, DC, June 10, 2005), on line at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/ris/rm/2005/47665.htm>

¹⁵ Joseph Kahn, “North Korea Is Studying Softer Stance from the U.S.,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2004.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Daily Press Briefing*, Adam Erel, Deputy Spokesman (Washington, DC: June 17, 2005), on line at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2005/48287.htm>

¹⁷ “[Editorial] Acting on Kim’s Promise,” *Korea Herald*, June 20, 2005, on line at <http://www.koreaherald.co.k>

¹⁸ *Donga ilbo*, June 21, 2005; “Hill Says U.S. Ready to Respect N. Korea in Nuke Talks,” *Yahoo! Asia News*, January 20, 2005, on line at <http://asia.news.yahoo.com/050620/kyodo/d8ar78ig0.html>

¹⁹ “Rice Says North Korea Making Excuses on Atomic Talks,” *Fairfax New Zealand Limited* , June 20, 2005, on line at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/print/o.1476.3319652a12.00.html>

²⁰ David E. Sanger, “U. S. Plans to Renew Its Offer of Food Aid to North Korea,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2005, p. A3.

²¹ Donald Gregg and Don Oberdorfer, “A Moment to Seize With North Korea,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2005, p. A21.

²² *Ibid.*