



U.S.-DPRK: Who Blinked, and Why? by Ralph A. Cossa

The announcement that the U.S. and North Korea had agreed to "multilateral" talks with China in Beijing on April 23 was most welcome after six months of escalating tensions. The conventional wisdom is that the U.S. military success in Iraq was the primary factor in bringing Pyongyang to the bargaining table with Washington and Beijing after months of insisting that only "knee-to-knee" bilateral talks with the U.S. were acceptable. But this fails to tell the whole story.

In reality, North Korea began showing some flexibility and moderation in its behavior in early March, when its vertical escalation - increasingly provocative actions ranging from the expulsion of IAEA inspectors to the restarting of its nuclear reactor to its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its missile tests and attempt to force down a U.S. reconnaissance plane - was replaced with more horizontal escalation; i.e., continued harsh rhetoric without any further ratcheting up.

Several actions in addition to the then-pending Iraq war likely contributed to this change in North Korean behavior. One was the deployment, in early March, of B-1 and B-52 bombers to Guam "for contingencies purposes" and the movement of F-117 stealth aircraft and an aircraft carrier battle group to the Korean Peninsula (ostensibly in support of an annual U.S.-ROK exercise). This can be described as "baseball bat in the corner" diplomacy. If one approaches North Korea waving a bat, Pyongyang's likely response is to turn even more combative. Speaking softly while carrying a big stick seems equally ineffective. But speaking firmly while the bat sits visibly in the corner appears to have gotten Pyongyang's attention.

As many have pointed out, a notably harder Chinese stance (reportedly including a three day termination of oil shipments due to "technical difficulties"), combined with stern warnings that pursuing a nuclear weapons program "would not be in Pyongyang's interest" no doubt played a positive role as well.

Less recognized has been Seoul's much firmer stance, beginning with President Roh Moo-hyun's inauguration address when he stressed that the North's nuclear program "can never be condoned." He further stated, in clear "either-or" terms, that "It is up to Pyongyang whether to go ahead and obtain nuclear weapons or to get guarantees for the security of its regime and international economic support." Does this mean that crossing nuclear "red lines" would result in a termination of ROK handouts and ROK support for tougher measures against Pyongyang? Senior ROK officials say "yes" but believe the message is best sent subtly - this is Seoul's baseball bat in the corner.

Which brings us to Pyongyang's April 18 admission, included in its announcement about DPRK-U.S. talks, that "we are successfully reprocessing more than 8,000 spent fuel rods at the final phase," which was subsequently (and more ambiguously) re-translated by the U.S. as "We are successfully completing the final phase, to the point of the reprocessing operation, for some 8,000 spent fuel rods." This ambiguous claim, which Washington and Seoul both dispute, appears to be a typical DPRK bargaining ploy aimed at gaining leverage in the upcoming talks, based on the presumably safe assumption that the U.S. would not take military action against this facility immediately before the talks. If past is precedent, Pyongyang can now be expected to try to seek rewards for stopping that which it they may not have even started doing.

Given the ambiguous nature of the North's reprocessing statement (which was subsequently withdrawn from the North's official web site), it would probably be unrealistic, if not counterproductive, for the U.S. and China to call off the talks based on this announcement alone. But, it should be made clear to Pyongyang that dialogue will not proceed until its threats and provocative actions come to a complete halt. A freeze in all presumed and threatened nuclear weapons-related activities must be a prerequisite to Washington and Beijing moving beyond the "talks about talks" stage.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang has described the April 23 meeting as "the DPRK-U.S. talks" at which "the Chinese side will play a relevant role as the host state" with the "essential issues" being discussed bilaterally. While Washington claims that the Chinese will be involved "as full participants," true multilateral dialogue, at a minimum (and by Washington's only earlier definition), must also include South Korea and Japan. While Seoul and Tokyo have expressed understanding and begrudgingly accept being excluded - at Pyongyang's insistence - from the "talks about talks," a failure to include both in the actual talks would be a serious blow to Washington's credibility with both of its treaty allies.

Pyongyang's decision to once again restart North-South ministerial talks, now scheduled for late April in the North, may well be aimed at reducing the pressure (or ROK demands) to include Seoul in the broader talks. But it is a safe bet that Pyongyang will keep the nuclear issue off the North-South table, continuing to insist - inappropriately - that Peninsula security issues can only be discussed between Pyongyang and Washington. This constitutes a continuing affront to Seoul that should not be tolerated.

Regardless of its veracity, Pyongyang's admission that it is (or is about to start) reprocessing is another direct affront to Seoul. Reprocessing would send a public signal that Pyongyang has chosen the nuclear weapons path - the reprocessing "confession" immediately followed a statement

that the Iraq war teaches the lesson that a "powerful physical deterrent force" is needed. It would also place Pyongyang in direct violation, by its own admission, of the 1992 South-North Denuclearization Agreement (which specifically precludes reprocessing on the Peninsula).

If Pyongyang does not quickly recant or agree to terminate this self-confessed or threatened action, the ball will then fall not in Washington's or Beijing's court, but in Seoul's. President Roh will have to then define just what "can never be condoned" means. It may be time for him to pick up the baseball bat and finally come out swinging!

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