



Hold the Celebrations by Ralph A. Cossa

Let's not open up the champagne too quickly! The announcement that North Korea finally has agreed to attend multilateral talks "to resolve the nuclear issue" is good news indeed . . . If they actually show up at the yet to be scheduled meeting (Pyongyang's track record is spotty at best when it comes to actually showing up at events even after promising to attend).

But sitting down at the table, as important as this is, puts us no closer to a resolution than we were yesterday and could make matters worse, rather than better, depending on how North Korea, and the other five (the U.S., South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia), approach the negotiations.

Has North Korea finally seen the light? Has Pyongyang become convinced that cooperating - or at least appearing to cooperate - will be more advantageous than threatening World War Three? More importantly, is it prepared, as it claims, to give up its (real or imagined) nuclear weapons in return for the Bush administrations' promised (but not fully articulated) "bold approach"? Or, will the negotiating table merely provide Pyongyang with one more venue for making its unreasonable demands and one more opportunity to drive a wedge among and between the other participants (and especially between Washington and Seoul)? Are the North Koreans selling peace or just trying to buy more time? It's too soon to say, but Pyongyang's past behavior certainly gives us reason to pause and to temper our optimism.

Remember also that North Korea had originally resisted multilateral talks, fearing that the others would all gang up on Pyongyang over its nuclear programs. This may or may not yet prove to be true, but the important thing to remember is that this was more than just Pyongyang's fear; it was also Washington's expectation. The Bush administration has consistently argued that North Korea's nuclear programs are an international, vice bilateral, problem and that the international community must speak with one voice in demanding that Pyongyang give up its nuclear ambitions in advance of any real progress on the diplomatic front.

This is where the coalition runs the risk of breaking down. While the other five participants all agree that North Korea must abandon its nuclear weapons program, few fully endorse Washington's timetable and most are more sympathetic than Washington to Pyongyang's demand that it receive economic incentives and some measure of security assurance in return for abandoning its nuclear ambitions. Beijing, in particular,

has repeatedly stressed that Pyongyang's security concerns must be satisfactorily addressed. Moscow, apparently added to the talks at Pyongyang's request, has expressed similar beliefs. (As an aside, one also wonders if Moscow's addition is an attempt to have another potentially friendly face at the table or if it reflects Pyongyang's growing suspicion of Beijing; remember North Korea existed for decades primarily by playing Moscow and Beijing against one another.)

Meanwhile, the Bush administration continues to argue that rewarding North Korea for "agreeing to do what it had already promised [in 1994 and on other multiple occasions] to do" means yielding to "blackmail"; something it has no intention of doing. Some compromise seems essential on this point if progress is ever to be made.

Washington's successful attempt at building an international consensus calling for an "immediate, verifiable, irreversible" end to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program has been largely unappreciated. A great deal of diplomacy went into getting us to where we are today, on the verge of multilateral negotiations, with Pyongyang clearly on the defensive. But are we now prepared to follow through? Are the other members of this ad hoc coalition prepared to back Washington's demands? And what, if anything, is Washington prepared to give in return?

If the multilateral negotiations are to succeed, Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow must be prepared to insist, with one voice and at a minimum, that North Korea immediately and verifiably freeze its various nuclear weapons programs as a precondition to further negotiations. This requires a return of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and the placing of spent fuel canisters (and any extracted plutonium) back under observation. In return, the other members must be prepared to guarantee to Pyongyang that no military strikes will be made against North Korean facilities or its leadership (Kim Jong-il's paranoia seems to be running high these days) as long as negotiations continue in good faith.

Washington should also be prepared, in close consultation with Seoul and Tokyo, and with Moscow and Beijing's concurrence, to lay out a clear roadmap of what it is prepared to offer, and when, in return for North Korea's verifiable cooperative actions (rather than just pledges to act). For this consensus to be achieved, the other parties must remain convinced that Washington is proceeding in good faith. Many still wonder; hard-line speeches such as the one given recently

in Seoul by Under Secretary of State John Bolton reinforce the belief, even among conservative U.S. allies, that Washington - or at least a significant element within the Bush administration - is not sincere in its desire to seek a diplomatic solution. At a time when Pyongyang seems to be toning down its rhetoric (notwithstanding a particularly vitriolic response to Bolton's remarks), Washington needs to do the same, not because it upsets North Korea but because it reduces its credibility with those partners whose cooperation is essential if a peaceful outcome is to be achieved.

Looking to the future, in all probability, the Agreed Framework - under which the U.S. promised to provide light water reactors to the North in return for an earlier (violated) freeze in its nuclear programs - is dead. But the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), created to implement that agreement, remains in place and could serve as a useful vehicle for overseeing a much broader based program of economic development in the North, once Pyongyang's nuclear programs are ended and verification mechanisms are in place.

All this presumes, of course, that North Korea is sincere about wanting finally to cooperate with the rest of the international community. Given its past track record, the burden of proof must rest on Pyongyang. Hold off on the champagne for now; the hard part is just about to begin.

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