



Prospects for the Six-Party Talks by Ralph A. Cossa

"Surrender means death!" This pretty much sums up North Korea's opening position in the Aug. 27-29 six-party talks in Beijing. The U.S. insistence that North Korea dismantle its nuclear program "fully, verifiably, and irreversibly" in advance of dialogue (or rewards) "is little short of demanding that the DPRK surrender to it," proclaims Pyongyang, demanding "confirmation that the U.S. has dropped its hostile policy" as a precondition to progress.

To demonstrate its "fundamental switchover," Washington must conclude "a legally binding nonaggression treaty and establish diplomatic relations" and promise not to "obstruct [North Korea's] economic cooperation" with other countries. The latter is an obvious reference to Washington's new Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) aimed at stopping the flow of weapons of mass destruction. (While the PSI is not aimed specifically or exclusively at Pyongyang, the shoe clearly fits.)

In effect, North Korea wants Washington to stop hindering its weapons trafficking (not to mention its highly lucrative drug smuggling operations). However, pending counterproliferation exercises by Washington's assembled 11-nation "coalition of the willing" send a strong signal that Washington is intent on strengthening the PSI as part of its broader noose-tightening policy toward Pyongyang.

Washington has also steadfastly refused to offer a bilateral nonaggression pact, even while hinting that some type of multilateral security assurances might be provided, an idea Russia and China have apparently also endorsed. Showing flexibility to Pyongyang on this point in advance of the meeting seems counterproductive, however; Pyongyang has already declared that any collective security guarantee would be "meaningless." Exchanging its nuclear deterrent force for a multilateral security guarantee constitutes "dishonest jugglery," it claims, even while refusing officially to verify that it has such a force.

Given the unyielding positions of the two main protagonists in this six part drama, there seems little hope for a positive outcome to the initial round of talks. But this does not mean that long-term prospects are hopeless.

There are several points on which all six already agree. First is that a war on the Peninsula serves no one's interests. While North Korea issues threats of nuclear Armageddon

almost daily, it realizes that the outcome of any major confrontation (nuclear or not) will be the destruction of the North Korean state. Despite this obviously preferred goal, Washington does not seek a military solution, given its preoccupation elsewhere and the high costs in terms of human lives lost (South Korean and American as well as North Korean) should the military option be exercised. While few in Tokyo, Beijing, or Moscow would shed tears if Kim Jong-il were to be eliminated tomorrow - the latter two see the utility of a North Korean buffer state remaining but not necessarily under Kim's rule - the uncertainty and costs involved in bringing about regime change in North Korea, at least at present, are higher than the presumed benefits. So all agree that there should be no war (even if Washington, wisely, keeps all options on the table).

In addition, while only the leadership in Pyongyang sees the perpetuation of the Kim Jong-il regime as a desired goal, all seem prepared to live with an outcome that leaves the current North Korean regime in place. One suspects that there is some doubt in North Korea about this and clearly there are elements in Washington that believe that North Korea regime change is not only desirable but essential, but this does not reflect official U.S. policy as articulated by President Bush himself. A peaceful outcome is the top priority, even if it helps to perpetuate the reprehensible regime in the North (until such time as it hopefully crumbles of its own weight).

There is a final point on which all six should, and must, agree before a peaceful solution can be assured: that the presence of nuclear weapons in North Korea decreases the prospects for peace and stability in East Asia and makes conflict on the Peninsula more rather than less likely. Five out of six are already convinced: South Korea and Japan have joined the U.S. in stating unequivocally that North Korea's nuclear weapons program cannot be tolerated and will result in further isolation and hardship in the North. Both China and Russia have issued forceful demands that North Korea give up its nuclear ambitions and return to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Pyongyang remains to be convinced.

Obviously, Pyongyang has concluded that its previous tactics - demanding bilateral talks with Washington while edging further out of the nuclear closet - were becoming counterproductive. Hence its agreement to enter into multilateral discussions. But it is unclear if it believes that its current conventional military power - which puts the lives of Seoul's 12-million plus inhabitants (including tens of thousands of Americans on any given day) at risk - is

sufficient to prevent the military option from being exercised, absent an additional nuclear security blanket. More important, talks about going down a “blind alley” aside, Pyongyang sees little reason to believe that Beijing or especially Seoul will really withhold economic life support.

There is something surreal about warning about “further isolation and crisis,” as ROK President Roh Moo-hyun did recently, while at the same time continuing mine clearing and construction activity aimed at opening road and rail links between North and South - not to mention warmly welcoming North Korean athletes (and cheerleaders) to the World University Games in Taegu after issuing demanded apologies for South Korean demonstrations of anger at North Korean policy.

As the six parties discuss the crisis in Beijing, world attention will be on the remarks being uttered by Washington and Pyongyang, even though neither is expected to go much beyond reiterating its already clearly stated positions during this opening round of talks. Instead, we should be paying closest attention to the comments coming from Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow. Unless and until Pyongyang believes that these traditionally more sympathetic states are prepared to play hardball in demanding an end to Pyongyang's nuclear program - thus making a continuation of this program a net minus rather than a perceived net plus - it is unlikely to take the talks seriously.

Realistically, the best we can hope for from this first meeting would be a declaration (probably unverified) by Pyongyang that it is freezing its current programs, along with a multilateral pledge by all parties that each will refrain from aggressive actions against the other while talks proceed in good faith. The best we are likely to get is an agreement to keep talking.

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