



Six Party Talks: Prospects for “Success”

by Ralph A. Cossa

The long-awaited second round of six-party talks on North Korea’s suspected nuclear weapons program is scheduled to begin in Beijing Feb 25. Expectations are currently running so low that many will call the meeting a success if the North Koreans merely show up, or if they don’t walk out once the U.S. begins speaking. Others are defining success as the parties agreeing, during the course of this meeting, to meet again, even if nothing else is accomplished beyond a further vetting of positions and grievances.

Nor does the U.S. seem to expect much progress. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, the chief U.S. negotiator at the talks, did nothing to raise the bar during a Washington speech on Feb. 13. In what was otherwise a comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of the nuclear crisis and diplomatic efforts to date, Kelly asserted that “we expect that the round will result in further progress toward a permanent solution, even if the progress may not be readily apparent.”

Despite U.S. admonitions that Pyongyang should follow “the Libya model,” few, if any, are predicting that North Korea will come clean and acknowledge its uranium-based weapons program, developed through the clandestine purchase of technology and equipment from Pakistan, despite the confession by the “Father” of Pakistan’s nuclear bomb, A.Q. Khan, that he arranged the transfer. (Pyongyang has been flaunting its plutonium-based program and seems willing to swap this for an ever-increasing package of rewards, but still denies – or, at best, refuses to confirm or deny – having a uranium enrichment program).

Making matters worse, only Washington and Tokyo seem willing to press Pyongyang on the uranium issue. Overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the others seem willing to give Pyongyang the benefit of the doubt, at least initially, in order not to impede progress.

Excuse me, but merely agreeing to sit and talk (or agreeing to sit and talk again) hardly constitutes real progress. Accepting “no apparent progress” as progress doesn’t help much either. Nor does pretending that a central part of the problem doesn’t exist.

Don’t get me wrong! Getting all six parties to the table represents a significant diplomatic achievement; if all agree to institutionalize the talks on a regularly scheduled basis – rather than at North Korea’s whim – this too would be an important breakthrough. In fact, if Beijing were smart, it would announce at the conclusion of this round that all parties have been invited back on a specific (and specified) date and at regular intervals beyond that; an offer that the U.S., ROK, Japan, and Russia would no doubt readily accept. This would

then put the pressure on North Korea to show up rather than on the others (primarily China) to somehow get Pyongyang to come.

It took a massive Chinese economic aid package last October just to get Pyongyang to agree “in principle” to come to the next round. Lord only knows how much more was passed under the table to get a North Korean representative to actually show up this week. This falls into the “rewarding bad behavior” category that the multilateral talks were supposed to avoid.

As Pacific Forum founder, RADM (ret) Joe Vasey has observed, “setting a date for the next round and then having the others show up to talk, regardless of whether Pyongyang comes or not, would constitute real progress! Let’s make the consequences for not showing up, rather than a reward for coming and doing nothing, serve as the real incentive.”

While Washington may be fuzzy on what constitutes “further progress,” it has been crystal clear about what constitutes ultimate success: CVID (the new acronym of choice in Washington, standing for the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs). Most experts seem to agree on two points regarding this objective: that it is “essential,” and that it is “unachievable.” Has any arms control agreement ever been “irreversible”? Can any verification regime achieve (or even come anywhere close to) 100 percent reliability? Would any proposed solution approaching this level of intrusiveness ever be acceptable to North Korea?

Setting the short-term bar too low and the final hurdle too high hardly sounds like a realistic formula for “success,” regardless of how you define the term.

I would argue that the first objective of all the parties should be to stop making matters worse. If, at the end of this next meeting, North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs (both uranium-and plutonium-based) are continuing unabated, this round of talks must be branded a failure.

North Korea has offered to freeze its nuclear weapons (and even its nuclear energy) efforts. Pyongyang’s desired *quid pro quo*’s are unacceptable: it wants Washington “to delist the DPRK as a sponsor of terrorism, lift [U.S.] political, economic and military sanctions and blockade . . . [and] supply heavy oil, power and other energy resources to the DPRK in return for its freeze of nuclear activities.” Given his stand against “nuclear blackmail,” it would be politically impossible for President Bush to accept such an outlandish proposal.

Instead, Washington should offer a more realistic *quid pro quo*. Since Pyongyang says that its nuclear deterrent program is in response to Washington’s “aggressive behavior,” the U.S., in concert with the other four participants, should

challenge Pyongyang to agree to a complete nuclear freeze in return for multilateral security assurances requiring all parties (North Korea included) to refrain from aggressive actions or behavior against all other participants as long as the talks are proceeding in good faith.

Phase one would entail a “words for words” commitment – a formulation put forth (but never fully defined) by Pyongyang – while study groups are immediately set up under the six-party framework to discuss and develop verification procedures and the form and substance of security guarantees. This agreement to not make matters worse while trying to figure out how to make them better would at least create the proper atmosphere for real progress over the longer term.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS [pacforum@hawaii.rr.com].

Additional commentary on the six party talks is provided in the following *PacNet* articles (summarized below) that are available upon request or from the Pacific Forum website [www.csis.org/pacfor/].

[PacNet 9C:](#) “Japan’s Policy Toward North Korea – How Effective are ‘Sticks’?” Yuki Tatsumi of CSIS argues that Japan must develop a more nuanced policy that provides clear benchmarks for North Korean behavior. Tokyo must use both carrots and sticks to influence Pyongyang, remembering that economic sanctions are diplomatic tools, rather than mere devices for expressing frustration.

[PacNet 9D:](#) “Challenges in Applying Economic Pressure against North Korea.” Scott Savitz of CNA Corporation also argues for careful consideration when applying economic sanctions against North Korea. In particular, policymakers must ensure that they do not increase the incentives for misbehavior by Pyongyang. Moreover, there must be realistic debate about the impact of sanctions: rarely do they incite populations to overthrow their leaders.

[PacNet 9E:](#) Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly’s Feb. 13 speech outlining the administration’s view of the six party talks [[Click on this link to Secretary Kelly’s Speech](#)].

Kelly noted that the U.S. “is committed to a diplomatic solution and is convinced that multilateral talks are the appropriate diplomatic forum” for interacting with North Korea. He called on Pyongyang to follow Libya and come completely clean on its WMD programs and rejoin the community of nations.