



North Korea: Searching for A.Q. Kim by Ralph A. Cossa

“Some good, some bad, some ugly!” That was the way a senior Bush administration official summed up the just-completed third plenary session of the six-party talks in Beijing, aimed at ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs. While other participants were reporting “substantial progress” and it was clear that Pyongyang (like Washington) had come to the meeting with a more cooperative attitude, the two sides “remained far from an agreement”; no breakthroughs had been anticipated and none occurred.

Given past meetings, however, when the most that could be agreed upon was to meet again, it was encouraging that both Washington and Pyongyang put serious proposals on the table, more clearly defining their respective positions and what could potentially be gained from a decision to move forward. It’s unlikely that either will accept the other’s offer as stated – going in positions rarely survive the first round of debate – but forward progress now seems possible: Pyongyang agreed that its proposed “freeze for rewards” would be a first step toward dismantlement of all its nuclear weapons programs – a consistent U.S. demand – and the U.S. agreed that rewards could come early in the process, at least from the other parties . . . and Seoul, Beijing, Moscow, and even Tokyo seem amenable to front-loading some energy and economic assistance if a verifiable freeze process could be initiated.

The U.S. side reportedly put forward a detailed seven-page proposal outlining what North Korea needed to do and what it could expect to receive if it did so. Pyongyang reportedly described the proposal as “constructive” and promised to give it “careful consideration.” It’s a bit early to break out the champagne, however. Washington’s detailed offer had been demanded by the others as a demonstration of the Bush administration’s willingness to move forward. It was seen as a win for the “engagers” over administration “neocons” who wanted to continue to squeeze Pyongyang, despite the obvious damage this tactic was having on the U.S. alliance relationship with South Korea and Japan. Subtle but firm pressure by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro was seen as instrumental in convincing President Bush that Washington had to be more forthcoming in this round of talks, as was considerably less than subtle pressure from China and South Korea. But it remains to be seen if Washington is prepared to really take “yes” for an answer if Pyongyang is smart enough to give this response.

Pyongyang’s answer will be a real test of North Korea’s willingness to seriously negotiate now, rather than wait and hope for “regime change” in Washington come November, as many suspect is its current tactic. How Pyongyang shapes its response will provide the best indication of its sincerity. Will it see Washington’s gesture as opening a window of

opportunity that it should seize upon, or as a sign of weakness to be further exploited?

For its part, Washington has stopped talking about “CVID” – complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement – recognizing that the term carries too much political baggage, but still sees this as the only acceptable long-term outcome. The immediate hang-up is over the word “complete.” Washington continues to insist that the freeze (and eventual dismantlement) must include Pyongyang’s clandestine uranium enrichment program as well as its acknowledged plutonium-based reprocessing efforts. North Korea refuses to admit that its uranium-based program exists, despite overwhelming evidence – including Pakistani nuclear scientist and proliferator extraordinaire A.Q. Khan’s public confession – and its own (since recanted) October 2002 admission that initiated the crisis.

The temptation for Pyongyang to continue to stonewall is high. Prior to the last round of talks, Beijing openly challenged Washington’s contention that the uranium program exists – presumably to exert pressure on the Bush administration to “be more flexible” and to demonstrate its “even-handedness” to Pyongyang – and Seoul has suggested that the uranium issue should somehow be set aside to be dealt with later. Such reactions almost certainly guarantee a prolonged crisis. As long as Pyongyang believes that its denial can drive a wedge between Washington and its negotiating partners, it will consider it to be in its strategic interest to continue to deny the program’s existence. China’s response is particularly disheartening, if not disingenuous; given its “special relationship” with Pakistan, it’s hard to believe that China is not fully aware of A. Q. Khan’s dealings.

The other parties know – or should realize – that President Bush cannot yield on this point: to turn a blind eye toward the uranium program now does more than “reward bad behavior”; it says that the whole crisis was unnecessary in the first place. Both election-year politics and sound strategic reasoning preclude such a step. Turning a blind eye toward Pyongyang’s major indiscretion would almost certainly guarantee future crises, even if this one were somehow temporarily defused. Likewise, a repetition of the North’s new politically unacceptable demand that Washington take part in the initial round of rewards, if repeated, would demonstrate that it is more interested in driving wedges than in defusing the crisis, especially if Beijing, Seoul, and others once again play into Pyongyang’s hands.

But, can North Korea recant and still save face? History says that it can. After decades of denying that it was kidnapping Japanese citizens, Pyongyang suddenly fessed up, “discovering” that some rogue intelligence elements had been carrying on this program unbeknownst to the central government. This type of “implausible denial” defense was

later used by Islamabad when, much to its declared shock and dismay, it discovered that the father of its bomb was running a nuclear Walmart, selling technology and components to all comers (Pyongyang included). Perhaps its time for Pyongyang to discover an A. Q. Kim in its own midst, so we can finally move forward toward a resolution of the problem.

Waiting until November is like playing Russian roulette . . . and there is no guarantee that a Kerry administration, if there was to be one, would be any more flexible on this point, or that Congress would allow it to be. Perhaps it's time for both sides to test if the other can really take "yes" for an answer. Having successfully pressured Washington to be more forthcoming, the other parties now need to pressure Pyongyang to test Washington's sincerity.

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Editor's Note: It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of a highly respected colleague, Mr. Lyall Breckon, who died suddenly of a heart attack while in Singapore last week. Lyall, who regularly wrote for the Pacific Forum's quarterly electronic journal, *Comparative Connections*, will be deeply missed by all who knew him. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his family and to his co-workers at the Center for Naval Analysis.