



Six-Party Talks: round four continues (finally)
by Ralph A. Cossa

The fourth round of Six-Party Talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons aspirations is set to resume Sept. 13 in Beijing after a five-week recess. One main sticking point, seemingly still unresolved, centers around North Korea's "right" to have a peaceful nuclear energy program.

Pyongyang says it will never give up this right and, furthermore, expects Washington to resume construction of the nuclear light water reactors (LWRs) promised under the now-defunct 1994 Agreed Framework. Washington, while stating that the issue of a peaceful nuclear energy program sometime in the future may not be a complete "showstopper," has rejected the idea of resuming LWR construction, indicating that neither the U.S. nor any of the other parties – China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea – are prepared to finance such an effort. While the others have not specifically said as much, there is an offer on the table from Seoul to provide North Korea with the same amount of power (two megawatts) that would have been generated by the LWRs, presumably as compensation for letting this program die a graceful death.

As the talks resume, it is useful to try to understand the motivation behind these conflicting stands. In discussing Pyongyang's reasons, of course, we can only guess. But, based on past performance and its own statements, an educated guess is possible.

There are a number of factors that most likely lie behind Pyongyang's insistence on pursuing a peaceful nuclear energy program. Primary among them is the fact that the other five parties do not agree on this issue. North Korea never misses an opportunity – and regrettably there are many of them – to drive wedges between and among its other five interlocutors. Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow are on record supporting this "right." Washington and Tokyo oppose it, arguing that North Korea gave up this right when it cheated on its prior agreements and walked away from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. A failure of the five to speak with one voice on this issue presents too tempting a target for Pyongyang to pass up.

Another strong possibility is that maintaining a "peaceful" nuclear program is a hedging strategy aimed at preserving a future nuclear weapons option, even if its current programs are eventually abandoned. As long as the North has direct access to spent fuel rods, it can always eject International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors (which would have had to have been allowed back in for a peaceful program to resume) and resume reprocessing activities to acquire more weapons grade plutonium (as it did at the onset of the current crisis). This is, of course, exactly why Washington and Tokyo do not want to see any type of nuclear energy programs in North

Korea (and this is much easier to understand than why the others seem so sanguine about this possibility).

The North is likely also raising the nuclear energy issue as a diversionary tactic to draw attention away from the real problem, which is ending both its acknowledged plutonium-based nuclear weapons program and its once-acknowledged and now denied uranium-based program. It may even be aimed at providing some political cover for the latter. Of late, in private conversations, Chinese interlocutors seem to be making a distinction between a weapons-related highly enriched uranium (HEU) program and an energy-related uranium enrichment program (for fuel fabrication). This may represent a possible face-saving way to acknowledge the presence of centrifuges that Pyongyang is known to have purchased – the North Koreans were reportedly presented with some of the evidence at the last round of talks – without acknowledging yet another violation or lie. (The odds are high that Washington would accept just about any cover story if the end result was to put the uranium program on the table.)

Adding the nuclear energy demand may also be a delaying tactic driven by greed and/or by more sinister motives. The more problems one lays on the table, the higher the anticipated reward for cooperating. This has been a long-standing North Korean tactic, which has generally worked. The current ROK proposal has yet to be accepted by the North. At a minimum, it is likely to demand power plants, not just power transmission lines emanating from the South (which could be cut off).

More troublesome is the view by many in Washington that Pyongyang has no intention of ever giving up its nuclear weapons program but recognizes that simply staying away from the talks (as they did between June 2004 and July 2005) is no longer an option. Therefore the smart thing to do is to show up but to keep piling on demands that one or more of the parties find unacceptable, in order to indefinitely stall while producing as many nuclear weapons as possible.

There is another factor that can't be overlooked: North Korean pride. North Korea does not take handouts; it negotiates loans (which will never be repaid). It does not accept aid; it allows other countries to pay tribute to the Dear Leader by sending gifts of food (since it is Washington's, or Seoul's, or always someone else's fault that people are starving). As a sovereign state, Pyongyang argues, it has as much right to nuclear energy as South Korea and Japan. Washington's allegations that it cannot be trusted to have such a program just make matters worse.

It would appear that the only way to deal with all these possible motives and still achieve Washington's long-term objective is for the other five parties (absent Pyongyang) to come to a common position regarding the nuclear energy program, one that agrees that such a program could exist, in principle, as soon as North Korea comes into full compliance

with IAEA safeguards and fully accounts for all its past nuclear activities (including pre-1994 actions that were supposed to be accounted for before the LWRs would be finished) – this is the same standard followed by Seoul, Tokyo, and all states with peaceful energy programs. All must also agree, and publicly and firmly state, that the Agreed Framework LWR program is dead and will not be resurrected.

The other five nations, privately but convincingly, also need to set a deadline for some form of meaningful progress on denuclearization to restrict the benefits currently gained by stalling. Absent some sort of progress, each must warn Pyongyang that its current level of diplomatic and economic interaction with North Korea will not be sustainable. They must also make it clear that if the current diplomatic process does not yield some positive results, then the only logical action is to take things to the next higher diplomatic level; namely, the United Nations Security Council.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at pacforum@hawaii.rr.com