



Six-Party Talks: The Way Forward or a Dead End?

by Ralph A. Cossa

Virtually every statement issued in response to North Korea's apparent first-ever nuclear weapons test has included an admonition (or plea) for Pyongyang to return to the moribund Six-Party Talks. But, are all parties prepared to take "yes" for an answer?

Pyongyang's response, to date, has been to steadfastly refuse to come back to the negotiation table, insisting that the United States first end its "hostile attitude" toward North Korea, to include the lifting of current "financial sanctions" imposed in response to Pyongyang's widely recognized money laundering and counterfeiting operations.

But, what if Pyongyang suddenly reverses course (as it is sometimes inclined to do) and declares that it is prepared to return to the talks, provided that the U.S. (and the others) deal with it as a full-fledged member of the nuclear club?

Washington's position on this is already clear: North Korea "can have a future or it can have these weapons. It cannot have both," Assistant Secretary of State Christopher R. Hill remarked prior to the test: "We are not going to live with a nuclear North Korea, we are not going to accept it." Seoul and Tokyo have also said quite explicitly that they "will not tolerate" a nuclear-armed North Korea. Even Beijing and Moscow have been refreshingly firm in condemning North Korea's test. This being the case, what's there to talk about?

The time has come for "Six Minus One" Talks, aimed at dealing with North Korea's most recent provocation. Pyongyang should be invited to come, provided it agrees in advance that it will take no further steps down the nuclear path and understands that the first topic of business at the new talks will be bringing about the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as called for in the Sept. 19, 2005 Six-Party Talks Joint Statement. But it should be made clear that the talks will proceed, with or without North Korea's presence.

The time has also come to speak about the unspeakable; namely, the need for "regime change" in North Korea. I am not talking here about regime change as an immediate military (or even political) objective, but as the only realistic alternative to a continued North Korea refusal to end its nuclear weapons program. The other (in my view unrealistic) alternative is accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, which would set a dangerous new precedent (or, more accurately, perpetuate the precedent established when India and Pakistan joined the nuclear club in 1998) and be extremely destabilizing both regionally and globally (Tehran is obviously closely watching the outcome).

If you ask 10 "experts" on North Korea a question, you are likely to get 12 different answers; they seldom agree even with themselves, much less with anyone else . . . except on one point: all agree that Kim Jong-il's first priority is regime (i.e., personal) survival. Until the international community takes actions that the "Dear Leader" perceives as directly

threatening his own survival, he is unlikely to be persuaded by idle threats or even by selective sanctions.

What's needed now is a clearly articulated containment policy that is aimed at either ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program or ending the regime that will not halt this dangerous drive. This does not mean marching on Pyongyang or conducting preemptive strikes – the targets are less than obvious, other than the Dear Leader himself (and he is an elusive target); no one knows where the plutonium and any potential bombs are hidden and striking nuclear reactors runs the risk of radiation pollution.

It does mean cutting off political and economic contact that clearly benefits the North (such as South Korea's Kaesong Industrial Zone project) and strict monitoring of humanitarian assistance (under UN auspices) and a firm, unified international response that North Korea is not welcome back to the table until the regime changes its mind or others in North Korea, with as much outside help as is possible, change the regime.

Internal regime change (with years of outside assistance and pressure) brought about regime change in Moscow and the eventual fall of the Berlin Wall. It also brought about today's China. Those (like myself) who have been admonishing Pyongyang to follow the "Beijing model" of opening up and economic reform tend to forget that this was only made possible in China through regime change: the removal of the so-called "gang of four" by Deng Xiaoping. If Kim Jong-il hasn't proven anything else, he has certainly proven that he's no Deng Xiaoping.

Pyongyang for years has been accusing the Bush administration of pursuing a regime change policy, despite Washington's continued expressed willingness to deal with the current regime, albeit only in a multilateral forum (in which bilateral talks remain possible). It's time to acknowledge that regime change is an alternative, and perhaps the only policy left to pursue, if Pyongyang will not honor its own pledges to denuclearize.

A firm policy of containment, with credible (i.e., enforceable and enforced) political and economic sanctions, is the best option for compelling Kim Jong-il to reverse his policies, or to persuade others among the North Korean elite to change their leader. It will also ensure that whatever nuclear weapons capabilities currently exist in North Korea remain there and are not exported into the hands of al-Qaeda or others, while hopefully dissuading other nuclear aspirants from pursuing a similar course.

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