



The Six-Party Talks: a sign of hope . . . or hopeless?

By Ralph A. Cossa

The second session of the fifth round of Six-Party Talks, held in Beijing on Dec. 18-22, ended much the same as the first session had some 13 months earlier, with a vague promise to implement the September 2005 denuclearization agreement "as soon as possible," but with absolutely no forward progress toward that goal. Like November 2005, the participants could not even agree on a date for the next session, promising only to "reconvene at the earliest possibility."

Prior to the talks, the DPRK (Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea or North Korea) had stated clearly, and on numerous occasions, that it had agreed to return to the dialogue "on the premise that the issue of lifting sanctions should be discussed and resolved." They were indeed discussed, but certainly not resolved, which was the clearly stated DPRK precondition for any movement toward denuclearization. What Washington approached as a negotiating point, Pyongyang stuck to as a prerequisite, assuring that no progress would be made unless the Bush administration somehow set U.S. law aside and removed its restrictions (over allegations of DPRK money laundering and counterfeiting operations) against Macao's Banco Delta Asia (BDA).

The chief U.S. negotiator at the Six-Party Talks, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, had made it clear that, from a U.S. perspective, the nuclear and sanctions issues were completely separate and should not be linked: "I would rather not obscure the [denuclearization] problem by talking about finances," Hill asserted. At the end of the day, however, Hill acknowledged that the senior DPRK negotiator, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan, apparently had "strict instructions" not to discuss nuclear developments until the sanctions issue was "resolved."

The U.S. has argued, thus far unpersuasively, that the pot of gold at the end of the cooperation rainbow would far exceed the \$24 million in assets frozen as a result of the BDA action. This may be true, but totally misses the point. From Pyongyang's perspective, it is not just about the money (although the sanctions have

reportedly hurt, especially since the BDA investigation has sharply curtailed Pyongyang's access to the international financial system as other banks have reportedly cut their own ties with North Korea out of fear of similar investigative action).

The sanctions are "proof" (in Pyongyang's eyes) of the Bush administration's "hostile policy" toward the DPRK. It is this policy, and not just the BDA sanctions, that must be demonstrably changed before Pyongyang would even consider giving up its nuclear weapons. In other words, even if the BDA issue is successfully resolved – through the lifting of U.S. restrictions or, more feasibly, a finding that only selected accounts were suspect and restrictions against the others were withdrawn – this would not guarantee progress toward the denuclearization goal.

Previously, Pyongyang also insisted that the delivery of two light-water nuclear reactors, promised under the now defunct 1994 Agreed Framework, was another prerequisite; North Korea's interpretation of the September 2005 Joint Statement reinforces this point. Pyongyang has also branded the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) – aimed at preventing the illegal movement of weapons of mass destruction and especially their delivery to non-state actors (read: al-Qaeda) – as another clear example of Washington's hostile intent to "isolate and blockade" the DPRK.

For that matter, UN Security Council Resolution 1695 and 1718, issued after North Korea's July 2006 missile launches and October 2006 nuclear test respectively, have also been condemned as "a product of the U.S. hostile policy toward the DPRK"; Pyongyang has demanded that these too be rescinded prior to denuclearization, creating a "catch-22" of sorts, since UNSCR 1718, in particular, demands that the DPRK "abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner," presumably as a precondition for lifting broad-based UNSC-imposed sanctions.

It is not clear from Pyongyang's declarations whether all these additional "proofs" of non-hostile attitude must be fully implemented before it will begin serious denuclearization discussions. However, North Korea has clearly signaled that it has no intention to

actually give up its nuclear weapons until the U.S. has demonstrated (by the above-mentioned actions and more) that it has fully abandoned its hostile policy.

The other reason Washington's promised pot of gold is unattractive is that it comes with very heavy strings attached. In order to get, Pyongyang must give; it must give up its only ace in the hole and the only reason it is taken seriously today: its nuclear weapons programs. While this may appear a reasonable quid pro quo to Washington, it is too high a price to pay from Pyongyang's vantage point, at least as long as it can still get without giving from others, which continues to be the case.

(Truly resolving the BDA problem, from Washington's perspective, would also require Pyongyang abandoning its counterfeiting and illicit smuggling and money laundering operations, another too high to pay price. Ironically, it has become U.S. efforts to stem such actions, rather than these DPRK illicit activities, that have been branded as "hostile" actions.)

Meanwhile, Pyongyang is still getting an abundant (and growing) amount of aid and development assistance from Seoul, primarily via the Mt. Kumgang tourist project and the Kaesong economic development zone, and from Beijing, through its economic investments throughout the DPRK, despite its missile and nuclear tests and UN-mandated sanctions. Notwithstanding its officially proclaimed policy to "not tolerate" a nuclear weapons-equipped DPRK, Republic of Korea assistance to its northern brothers reached record levels in 2006 and, if published reports are to be believed, is scheduled to grow even larger in 2007. While Chinese figures are harder to come by, it is assumed that PRC investments and aid will also continue, as Beijing incredulously argues that "punishment isn't the goal" of the UNSC sanctions.

Why then should we assume or even hope that another round of Six-Party Talks, if one occurs, will be any more fruitful than the last two have been? While North Korea would no doubt welcome another pot of gold, they are doing very well with the pots being provided by Seoul and Beijing, without any visible strings attached.

Until and unless Seoul and Beijing are prepared to increase the cost of non-cooperation, the best we can hope for, even if another round of talks occurs, is continued DPRK stalling and diversionary tactics and increased frustration, with little recourse, in Washington. The Bush administration is right when it says that China and the ROK share its denuclearization

goal. Until they have crafted a common approach toward achieving that goal, however, North Korea is unlikely to cooperate.

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