



The Four-Party Talks: Testing Pyongyang's Sincerity

By *Ralph A. Cossa*

Senior officials from North and South Korea, China, and the U.S. reassemble in Geneva on April 24th for the fifth round of Four-Party Talks aimed at replacing the existing 1953 Korean War armistice with a permanent peace treaty. The odds of a breakthrough appear slim, however, given North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan's prediction after round four that the talks would remain "empty" until Pyongyang's demands regarding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the South are met. The U.S. and South Korea have steadfastly (and correctly) insisted that the U.S. military presence is for Washington and Seoul alone to decide, that American forces are not a bargaining chip.

Despite North Korean intransigence, some limited progress has been made at the previous meetings. After much prodding, North Korea agreed at the third meeting to the establishment of two subcommittees, one to discuss replacing the armistice with a peace regime and the other to formulate possible confidence building measures (CBMs). At the fourth meeting, all agreed on subcommittee procedures, and ideas for tension reduction on the Peninsula — including the establishment of a humanitarian corridor and a new communications channel — were raised (but not agreed upon). The question is, where will they go for here?

I believe it is time to put some significant confidence building measures on the table. For example, since the U.S. and South Korea have little to hide when it comes to their combined military capabilities — indeed, a greater awareness of this combined strength serves the cause of deterrence — and have no plans to invade the North, why not offer Pyongyang an "open skies" aerial observation agreement to permit mutual reconnaissance over one another's territories. Alternatively, third party reconnaissance platforms operated by a neutral nation or organization could monitor troop disposition and movements with the information then shared by both sides.

Such an offer should be attractive to the North, which today still relies on submarine-borne infiltration teams and frogmen as a primary (and risky) means of determining what's going on in the South. Unlike Seoul, Pyongyang does not have ready access to high technology photo reconnaissance and sophisticated listening post techniques and is not privy to the high-quality intelligence information provided to the ROK by the U.S. (although one suspects that the Chinese may share some intelligence data with their North Korean colleagues).

Another way to deal with the basic distrust that drives the North's (and the South's) intelligence collection effort is the establishment of a South-North sensor system within and along

the DMZ that could provide early warning of unusual troop movements — a similar system has worked for years in the Sinai Desert between Israel and Egypt. In fact, a preliminary DMZ monitoring model has been prepared by the Cooperative Monitoring Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, working in cooperation with the ROK's Korean Institute for Defense Analysis. North Korean officials should be invited to work alongside ROK and American specialists to revise the model to make it a more suitable South-North CBM.

The open skies and cooperative monitoring proposals are examples of the type of CBMs needed between South and North Korea. Other traditional measures that could be discussed include direct military to military contacts, prior notification of military exercises, the opening of military exercises to international observers, greater openness regarding military budgets and defense planning and procurement, and the sharing of defense information through the production and exchange of Defense White Papers.

Long overdue also are South-North discussions on mutual force reductions. Neither side can afford to sustain large standing armies on a wartime footing in the face of their current economic crises. In addition, simple arithmetic tells us that a reunified Korea, absent any significant prior force reductions, would have 1.85 million men under arms. This would make it the second largest army in the world (behind China), larger than the U.S. military and more than nine times the size of Japan's Self-Defense Force. South-North dialogue must focus, early on, on reducing the number of military forces and hardware on both sides, in order to make eventual reunification less alarming to a unified Korea's neighbors. American and Chinese security guarantees will likely be required to convince both sides to reduce their swollen militaries.

Even if this current round breaks no new ground, merely conducting talks still achieves several important purposes: it underscores the commitment of the other three parties to the armistice until such time as a treaty is achieved; it reiterates to North Korea that a separate peace treaty with the U.S., excluding the ROK, remains out of the question; it keeps Pyongyang engaged and provides an opportunity for direct discussions between North and South; and it provides China an opportunity to be actively involved in the process — Chinese strong backing for the establishment of the two subcommittees reportedly was instrumental in convincing North Korea to accept this ROK proposal.

Meanwhile, if discussions on Peninsula confidence building measures actually take place and, more importantly, if they result in the implementation of genuine South-North CBMs, they will make a more positive, pro-active contribution to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. If Pyongyang is as committed to peace as it says it is and as concerned about U.S. and ROK intentions as it claims, then it should embrace proposals that

make military capabilities and intentions along the DMZ more transparent.

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