



The following two PacNets, by Larry Niksch and Alan Romberg, offer differing views on the upcoming six party talks.

## **PacNet 9**

### **The Six Party Talks: Guess Who's in the Catbird Seat**

by Larry Niksch

As another round of the six party talks in Beijing approaches on Feb. 25, a look back to February 2003 can leave one astounded over the diplomatic fortunes of the two chief antagonists. A year ago, North Korea appeared headed toward the status of an isolated international pariah through its brazen actions and threats. The U.S. seemed to be in an ascendant position. It issued communiqués with other concerned nations criticizing North Korea's actions. It succeeded in securing six party talks. At the six party meeting in Beijing in August 2003, a U.S. official declared: "We're letting them dig their own grave." The Bush administration believed that North Korea was self-destructing and was alienating the other participants. U.S. officials spoke confidently of securing China's support. Administration officials remain emboldened, citing Libya's decision to give up weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) as the example for North Korea to follow.

However, a broader look does not appear to fit the administration's optimistic analysis. North Korean diplomacy has placed key items of Pyongyang's agenda at the top of the negotiating agenda: North Korea's proposal for a formal nonaggression security guarantee from the U.S. and Pyongyang's proposed freeze of its plutonium program. China, South Korea, and Russia speak positively of these proposals and declare that the U.S. must address North Korea's concerns. Japan alone seconds the U.S. position that North Korea must commit first to a "complete, irreversible, verifiable" dismantling of its nuclear programs and take concrete measures toward that end.

Expressions of skepticism about U.S. claims of a secret North Korean uranium enrichment (HEU) program now come from Chinese, Russian, and ROK officials. North Korea is receiving cash from China (\$50 million in October 2003), and increased fuel and food from China, economic aid from South Korea, and economic aid from Russia. Even the Bush administration has offered North Korea "security assurances," which would be more concessionary than the nuclear security guarantee offered in the 1994 Agreed Framework.

North Korea's successes are the result of a negotiating strategy that plays on the psychological fears of the other parties coupled with a concerted propaganda strategy to advance Pyongyang's agenda. After each of the Beijing meetings, North Korea criticized the meetings, criticized the U.S. position, and warned that it saw no usefulness in the meetings and likely would not participate again. Then after repeated warnings, North Korea made "new" proposals. After the April meeting, North Korea hammered away on its

proposal for a formal U.S.-North Korean nonaggression pact. In the aftermath of the August meeting, North Korea proposed a "freeze" of its plutonium nuclear program while asserting that a nonaggression guarantee was necessary to prevent the Bush administration from staging an "Iraq-like" unilateral attack. Pyongyang contended that a freeze was a logical "first stage," employing enticing captions, such as "simultaneous actions," "action vs. action," "simultaneous package deal," "bold concession," and "noninterference in our economic development." While promoting these proposals, North Korea steadily escalated the denials of an HEU program.

Other governments, apprehensive over North Korea's threat to abandon the talks, sought to react positively to persuade Pyongyang to agree to future meetings. President Bush acceded to China's overtures to offer multilateral security assurances. China began to press for a freeze as an integral part of any agreement. Public and elite opinions in China and South Korea reacted favorably to North Korea's proposals, clearly influenced by Pyongyang's propaganda. These positive reactions inevitably have led others to question U.S. positions, including the U.S. claim of a secret North Korean HEU program.

North Korea has been able to exploit weaknesses in U.S. strategy. The administration's unwillingness to offer detailed, comprehensive settlement proposals has given Pyongyang an open playing field to advance its proposals into a dominant position in the talks. Other governments have nothing to respond to other than Pyongyang's proposals. North Korea is not pressured to make a fundamental policy choice.

The administration's reliance on China also has contributed to North Korea's successes. China has worked hard to organize the talks and has urged the U.S. to issue comprehensive settlement proposals. However, China has tilted toward North Korea on substantive issues. The question of what China wants as an outcome remains unanswered. Is it a complete termination of North Korea's nuclear program or an agreement with more limited obligations? Without a credible answer to this question, the U.S. reliance on China has proven to be an unstable foundation.

The absence of a U.S. response to North Korea's propaganda strategy also has contributed significantly to North Korea's strengthened position. The Bush administration rejected North Korea's nonaggression pact and nuclear freeze proposals but did not challenge the substance of the proposals in order to bring into the open their negative features and hidden agenda. The administration's response to the nonaggression pact proposal was to contend that the Senate would not ratify it. Its response to North Korea's denials of an HEU program has been to assert that North Korea admitted to it in October 2002; this creates at best the perception of a "he said-she said" dispute. The administration hopes that the alleged confession of Pakistan's A.Q. Khan will contain the growing skepticism. However, North Korea already charges

that Khan's confession was coerced, and the administration offers no evidence of its own of the HEU program.

North Korea's strengthened position in the six party talks puts two related outcomes within reach of Pyongyang. One is an agenda in future meetings that emphasizes pressure from the other governments on the U.S. to accept an agreement for a limited nuclear freeze that would be designated as a "first phase" but in reality would stand alone, with other phases to be determined through an undefined diplomatic process. The Bush administration likely would reject such pressure; but the result probably would be an erosion and eventual end of the six party talks. Public opinion likely would blame the U.S. for the collapse or would perceive "moral equivalency" between the U.S. and North Korea. This outcome would free North Korea of the threat of international sanctions, assure continued economic support from China and South Korea, and give North Korea more options in advancing its nuclear and missile programs – including an open demonstration of nuclear capabilities with reduced risk of punitive measures from neighboring states. If growing North Korean confidence transformed into overconfidence, North Korea might be tempted to proliferate WMD in high-risk ways.

The big question in the Feb. 25 meeting is whether the Bush administration can regain a dominant U.S. position over the negotiating agenda or whether North Korea will make further progress toward these outcomes.

*Larry Niksch, [lniksch@crs.loc.gov](mailto:lniksch@crs.loc.gov), is a specialist in Asian Affairs at the U.S. Congressional Research Service. The opinions expressed are his own.*

## **PacNet 9A**

### **Six Party Talks, Round Two – In Search of an American Policy** by Alan D. Romberg

On the eve of the second round of six party talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program (to be convened Feb. 25 in Beijing), reports indicate the Bush administration will "barely sweeten" the position it took at the first round last August. The president's senior foreign policy advisers reportedly have decided to reject Pyongyang's offer of a freeze on plutonium-related facilities as "woefully inadequate," pointing to the North's refusal so far to acknowledge, much less commit to eliminate, an alternative highly enriched uranium (HEU) program to produce fissile material.

If accurate, this demonstrates once again the Bush administration lacks a serious policy for moving the North Korean nuclear issue from its current sorry – and increasingly dangerous – state toward resolution. The administration seems unable to get past the rhetoric of "complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement" of the North's nuclear weapons program to actually develop a workable strategy to achieve that important goal. Rather, as one official recently put it, the objective of the coming talks is simply to tread water, keeping the North at the table. "The motto is Do no harm," he said.

South Korea's ambassador to the U.S. has taken a more sensible – and potentially productive – approach. He has observed that "the second round of talks can make progress even if North Korea does not admit the existence" of an HEU program as long as the North does not bar discussion of that issue. In other words, rather than forcing confession or denial, the next round should leave the door open to progress through

negotiation – while the Bush administration seems to view real negotiation without a prior DPRK confession to be capitulation and the role of "diplomacy," therefore, as an official put it, merely as "a placeholder to get us through the election."

The "father" of Pakistan's nuclear program, A. Q. Khan, has reportedly confessed to providing elements of an HEU program to North Korea. After presenting this evidence to others in the negotiation, it is perfectly reasonable for the U.S. to confront North Korea with that same information and insist that inconsistencies between the North's denials and Khan's information be cleared up.

But while it may be a good debating point to argue that Pyongyang should simply follow Libya's example (which – in the president's own words – came only after nine months of intense negotiation) and unilaterally announce a policy reversal, reliance on that line demonstrates once again the lack of any deep understanding of North Korea or a seriousness of purpose about actually resolving the problem.

U.S. officials will reportedly be explicit in their demands of Pyongyang, but far less concrete about what the North can expect in return. Why? In part because some believe the DPRK is under unbearable stress and will have to capitulate, but also because, even if the HEU program is acknowledged, there is disagreement within the U.S. government about what to offer Pyongyang, in what order, on what timetable.

Beyond insistence on "not rewarding bad behavior," some officials argue, for example, it is not sensible to grant the North's request for security assurances – which takes but a moment – in exchange merely for a commitment to dismantle the nuclear program – by necessity a long-term process. Others note, however, Pyongyang can argue that once it dismantles its program, it cannot be quickly – if ever – reconstituted, whereas a security assurance can be withdrawn in an instant, so offering such an assurance would cost little and yet be a useful inducement.

While Washington dithers, the North is proceeding with its nuclear weapons program at a pace probably slower than Pyongyang claims but perhaps faster than Washington perceives. Recent visitors to the North saw evidence that, at the least, spent fuel previously in safe storage is no longer there, fuel judged sufficient for five or six nuclear weapons. Moreover, the status of the HEU program is totally unknown.

The issue is not whether the U.S. is right to seek the total abolition of the North's nuclear program, including both its plutonium-and uranium-based components. Obviously it is. The issue is whether Washington has a coherent policy realistically designed to achieve that goal. So far the evidence is not encouraging.

*Alan D. Romberg is senior associate and director of the East Asia Program at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. He can be reached at [aromberg@earthlink.net](mailto:aromberg@earthlink.net)*