



The Six-Party Failure by Aidan Foster-Carter

When the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear issue were first held in 2003, this seemed the way to go. China's keenness to host them showed a welcome proactiveness by its new leaders, after long passivity to the nasty crisis brewing on its borders. Also, this was a full house: both Koreas plus all four powers – China, the United States, Japan and Russia – bound to the Korean Peninsula by geography or history. Hopes ran high that this format would get somewhere.

Two years and three rounds later, optimism is harder to maintain. In fact, it was shattered on Thursday. After Pyongyang's announcement for the first time that it has nuclear weapons and is abandoning the talks, it is time to be honest about the many ways in which this forum has failed.

From the first, it was unwieldy. Former U.S. negotiator Jack Pritchard complained that 48 interpreters were needed. Despite U.S. insistence that North Korea is not just a bilateral concern, we all know who the two principals are. Rather than facilitating direct dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang, this sextet has in practice allowed both to avoid it.

Second, we risked mistaking process for progress. In what one might call "mission shrink" – the opposite of mission creep – the policy goal retreated to merely trying to drag the North Korean horse to water, regardless of whether it would drink if it ever got there. So if a long-delayed fourth round of talks is announced in spite of Thursday's development, hold the champagne. Pyongyang has played this will-they-won't-they game for decades: one step forward, two steps back.

Third, there was bad faith all around. The six-party charade created an illusion of motion, which suited everyone. The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush could pretend it was engaging North Korea, when in fact it is internally divided – and preoccupied elsewhere. Not until last June was secretary of state Colin Powell allowed to offer a detailed plan: too late, with the US elections due. There is no sign that Bush II will be any readier to focus seriously (not just rhetorically) on Korea.

Fourth, for the other parties, the six-party talks were a fig leaf. China, Russia and the new South Korea form a post-Cold War axis of carrot. Like the three monkeys of fable, they see, hear, and speak no evil of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. Tact is one thing, but Panglossian complacency another. Does this troika really believe their own smiley assurances that everything will turn out fine? (Only Japan, pursuing its own abductions agenda – North Korea abducted its citizens – wields a balanced mix of stick and carrot.)

Fifth, fetishizing the six-party (non-)process is a dangerous diversion. The ways North Korea is a threat have long been legion. Two nuclear programs – both now out of control, thanks to Bush's bungling – are just for starters. Add

in chemical and biological weapons, missile development and proliferation (addressed by former president Bill Clinton – Bush broke this off), huge conventional and special forces, not to mention counterfeiting, trafficking, refugees, and human-rights abuses. Just to list this dire litany is to despair of ever resolving it all – unless Kim Jong-il emulates Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and strikes the mother of all grand bargains.

Even if he may want to, none is on offer. But the Dear Leader has trouble at home too. Six-party fixations have also distracted us from internal North Korean politics: a murky area, but one where hidden eruptions begin to ruffle the bland theatrical veneer. Last year Kim purged his brother-in-law and ex-right-hand man Chang Song-taek. Three sons vie to be dauphin, with rumors of murder plots (in Vienna, even). This struggle may be over policy – hawks versus doves – or simply power. Either way, stability can no longer be taken for granted.

The grassroots are restive too. A Seoul non-governmental organization (NGO) lately released the first-ever video of dissidents in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Sunshine cheerleaders rubbish this, but the real question is: What took them so long? Half-baked reforms have seen inflation soar and rations slashed. Yet if the state no longer provides, the old social contract is dead. Ever more North Koreans will start to ask the Janet Jackson question of their rulers: What have you done for me, lately?

It is crucial to see the big picture and take the long view. The key North Korea question is how and when – not whether – this ghastly failed regime will cease to be. Just possibly it might manage to morph into something more sensible, like China and Vietnam. But that looks a long shot. It is only prudent to guard against and plan for much bumpier landings.

Here, the sagging six-party process just might have a use after all. As Professor Francis Fukuyama has argued, the other five could reconstitute themselves as a permanent regional security body, which Northeast Asia has sorely lacked hitherto. Indeed, given North Korea's latest defiance, ideally the other five should meet right now – and issue a unanimous statement telling Pyongyang to stop playing games and come back to the table. Somehow I can't see that happening, however. Each of the five differs on agenda and tactics, suggesting that so far this multilateralist effort remains on the shallow side. Still, it's a start.

Thinking longer term – or maybe sooner than we imagine – it is crucial that this quintet reach a tacit (if probably secret) understanding on who will or will not intervene if North Korea blows, or collapses into chaos. Otherwise, modern Korean history warns that this could be a moment of great peril.

A century ago, Korea's three neighbors fought two wars for control of a dying kingdom. A terrible war also followed the superpowers' partition of the peninsula in 1945. Now, as another Korean dynasty looks moribund, it is vital that all concerned cooperate to prevent a tough transition becoming a third cataclysm.

That is the real issue in Korea now; not just nukes, still less the fate of a hexagonal table in Beijing.

Aidan Foster-Carter is honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University, England. He has followed North Korean affairs for 35 years. This article originally appeared in the Feb 11 edition of Asia Times Online and is reprinted with permission. He can be reached at afostercarter@aol.com