



From Six Party Talks to a Regional Security Mechanism by James Goodby and Donald Gross

North Korea is a weak and isolated country, but it recently rebuffed demands by the United States, Russia, Japan, China, and South Korea to return to the Six Party Talks on eliminating its nuclear weapons program. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il, says Pyongyang *might* participate in these negotiations "when conditions are suitable."

What's going on? It is one thing for North Korea to supply nuclear weapons to rogue states or terrorist groups; it's another for it to say "no" to the most powerful nations on earth. The time has come for these five countries to act together to contain the immediate North Korean threat and address other threats that are emerging in Northeast Asia.

The Six Party Talks are a test of whether these countries can collectively deal with regional security concerns. The answer to that question is even more significant for the future of peace and security in Northeast Asia than whether Kim Jong Il sends a delegation to Beijing.

Each day it becomes clearer that dangerous balance-of-power politics have begun taking hold in Northeast Asia to offset the rising power of China. Japan has been moving simultaneously to improve diplomatic relations with Russia and to align itself more strongly against China on the incendiary Taiwan issue.

Some nationalists in South Korea have called for their country to move closer to Beijing, allowing China to reassume its historical "big brother" role to Korea. They foresee conflict with Korea's traditional enemy, Japan, and an end to the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

On the other side of the ledger, the U.S. is being increasingly excluded from broader movements toward multilateral cooperation, especially in the economic sphere. Washington has not been invited to the first East Asia Summit, scheduled to take place in Malaysia in December 2005, where participants will consider forming an East Asian economic community. Already, in the so-called "ASEAN + 3" process, Japan, South Korea, and China regularly join with Southeast Asian countries to address regional economic and diplomatic concerns.

Both to prevent competing alignments from forming and to ensure its role in the region's expanding multilateral diplomacy, Washington should move swiftly to convert the Six Party Talks into a broader regional security mechanism focused on stabilizing relations among the five – or preferably six, if North Korea chooses to end its isolation. This organization should be supported by a small secretariat. It should periodically hold meetings of Cabinet-level officers to coordinate policies.

The agenda for the broader multilateral security discussion should be organized around three areas: security, economics, and humanitarian issues. In the security basket, the parties should develop and implement new transparency and confidence-building measures. Nuclear issues should be included, including plans for modernization and missile defenses.

Talks on North Korea's nuclear programs should continue in this forum if Pyongyang agrees to resume the suspended discussions. If it does, the talks should also include discussions on a peace agreement for the Korean Peninsula to replace the 1953 armistice, recognizing that these talks would be limited to the parties directly involved in the Korean War.

In the economic basket, the parties should promote regional development. In particular, they should discuss plans for constructing natural gas pipelines to meet pressing future energy needs and consider forming an energy cooperation network.

In the humanitarian basket, the parties could discuss the alleviation of problems arising from poverty and lack of adequate medical care, as well as assistance to refugees. They should also address ways to end the pervasive trafficking in women and children. Family reunification should be high on the agenda, if North Korea participates.

Steps toward a multilateral security mechanism built on the foundation of the Six Party Talks would strengthen prospects for successfully managing the North Korea nuclear issue. For this reason – and to prevent North Korea from thwarting the promise of the Six Party Talks – the U.S. should urge Japan, China, Russia, and South Korea to establish a stronger and more extensive multilateral security structure even if North Korea, at first, refuses to take part. In so doing, the U.S. will best advance its own long-term interests in Northeast Asia while also creating a framework for resolving fundamental political and security issues on the Korean Peninsula.

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