



Six Party Talks: Defining a Realistic Roadmap for Success, by Scott Snyder, Ralph A. Cossa, and Brad Glosserman

As representatives to the Six-Party Talks reconvene to determine next steps toward their agreed goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, they face a decidedly mixed picture. The Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement of principles, the first mutually agreed product to result from two years of meetings, has created real momentum. It is not yet a “breakthrough,” however, and a failure to build on that limited consensus may lead to renewed stalemate. In the meantime, North Korea may continue to produce material for more nuclear weapons and threaten stability in Northeast Asia.

The Joint Statement provides guidelines for a more specific road map for resolving the second North Korean nuclear crisis. Most notably, all parties have pledged to pursue “commitments for commitments” and “actions for actions” as part of the implementation of steps toward North Korea’s denuclearization in return for steps toward normalization of relations among all parties. Based on recent discussions with the Korea Working Group of the U.S. Institute of Peace, we have identified key procedural recommendations and sticking points that six-party negotiators will want to consider as they reconvene in Beijing.

North Korea’s tendency to play “divide and conquer” and exploit divisions among the other five countries requires the U.S. to work closely with the other four interlocutors, but especially both South Korea and China. Any failure to achieve a full consensus would likely result in a severe deterioration of U.S. relations with either South Korea or China. There is a limit to U.S. patience with protracted negotiations involving North Korea, a result of fears that Pyongyang is using negotiation as a pretext for delay. A common definition of failure and/or agreement on milestones and “redlines” among the other five parties is essential to overcome North Korea’s “divide and conquer” tactics, and to avoid the perception that it is Washington’s inflexibility or impatience rather than Pyongyang’s behavior that is at fault should the talks falter.

Major potential sticking points in the next phase of negotiations include North Korea’s right to receive light-water reactors and the exercise of that right; Pyongyang’s return to compliance with the NPT and IAEA; the scope, methods, and nature of any verification process; and types of security guarantees that may be offered as part of a negotiated solution. Washington, Seoul, and Beijing (at a minimum) must develop a common position on these issues. Presumably, there is already a consensus among all parties that North Korea must explain its uranium-related activities as part of its denuclearization and on the “appropriate time” to discuss peaceful nuclear energy programs in the North.

The U.S. and ROK must reach prior agreement on alliance issues that might be involved in negotiations with North Korea

on a peace regime. Alliance issues have traditionally (and rightfully) been viewed as a bilateral issue between allies; neither Washington nor Seoul should unilaterally negotiate such issues directly with North Korea if they expect the alliance to survive. A common U.S.-ROK position on such issues as the reconfiguration of USFK and negotiations over transfer of wartime command to South Korea is needed prior to negotiations on new peace arrangements on the Korean Peninsula.

Security assurances will be a vital component of any agreement. There must be guarantees from Washington and from Pyongyang too; the other four participants have a central role in underwriting, verifying, and enforcing these assurances. Tokyo’s security (and political) concerns must also be addressed.

One significant challenge is identifying appropriate simultaneous and sequential actions that all parties can take to achieve these objectives. This process will require intensive input from technical experts in regular working-level contacts that can be convened to support diplomatic negotiations. (Many of these requirements have been spelled out in our previous study, “Six-Party Talks: Developing a Roadmap for Future Progress” [*Issues & Insights*, No. 9-05, August 2005]) At the same time, the Bush administration faces the political burden of demonstrating that any new agreement is more practical and comprehensive than the 1994 Agreed Framework. Therefore, any agreement that builds on the Joint Statement must include sufficient irreversible action by North Korea to demonstrate to a skeptical U.S. that this “solution” will be more successful than the Agreed Framework.

One approach to overcome the risk of stalemate is taking reversible unilateral measures (RUMs) that the DPRK would be expected to reciprocate under the slogan of “commitment for commitment, action for action.” This approach has an important and relevant precedent: North Korea’s decision to allow IAEA inspections of nuclear sites in 1992 followed the George H.W. Bush administration’s announcement that it would remove forward-deployed ground-based tactical nuclear weapons from foreign countries worldwide, presumably including the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. “neither confirm nor deny” policy notwithstanding.

One possible RUM might be to return to the “status quo ante” – the situation that existed in October 2002 prior to the revelation of North Korea’s covert uranium enrichment activities. Such an approach could include a commitment to resume heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea with the expectation that North Korea, prior to first delivery, would account for plutonium produced after its departure from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), accept inspections, and halt continued unilateral production of fissile material while the negotiation process proceeds. At an early stage in the

process (i.e., at the November meeting), North Korea must also acknowledge receipt of uranium enrichment equipment such as the Pakistan-provided centrifuges.

Given the limited brief provided to North Korean negotiators, a successful negotiation in the six-party format may ultimately require direct high-level contact with key decision-makers in Pyongyang. A high-level approach to the issue might require changing the frame of the negotiations: rather than focusing solely on North Korea's denuclearization, negotiations should address the larger question of how to bring lasting peace to the Korean Peninsula. In this context, the nuclear agreement is one component of the larger deal.

The United States should continue efforts outside (and not linked to) the Six-Party Talks to require North Korea to respect international standards in human rights, drug trafficking, and counterfeiting of U.S. currency. North Korea's compliance with international norms and laws will be a critical part of any process that leads to normal relations between Washington and Pyongyang.

Finally, thought should be given now to institutionalizing the current dialogue mechanism to facilitate implementation of any final agreement. Many analysts agree on the desirability of a more formalized official Northeast Asian security dialogue that can address not only the implementation of North Korean nuclear issues, but also enhance trust among the major powers in Northeast Asia. That objective would be greatly enhanced if the Six-Party Talks can successfully address the North Korean nuclear issue.

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