

## **A Way Out of the Six-Party Impasse?**

by Stephen Blank

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The Six-Party Talks on Korea are moribund, if not dead. They have been boycotted by North Korea since 2008 and now the US and its allies refuse to return until Pyongyang apologizes for its reckless provocations of South Korea in 2010 and shows a genuine commitment to negotiate over denuclearization. Meanwhile, due to those provocations and South Korea's determination to resist any future attacks, there were real fears of war. As the Obama administration has embraced its predecessor's mantra of complete, verifiable, and irreversible disarmament as a precondition for negotiation, talks have stalemated since North Korea appears unlikely to surrender its nuclear weapons.

Neither should we count on China remonstrating on our behalf with North Korea even though it recently may have persuaded North Korea to show restraint. China appears to have decided to emphasize its vital interest in North Korean stability over supporting US pressures and threats. China's readiness to look the other way when it comes to UN sanctions (for which it voted) and recent public messages suggest that it will challenge North Korean behavior only when there is a genuine threat of war. This challenges the US beliefs that Sino-US interests here are aligned and that China will always convey US demands to Pyongyang. This unexamined and deeply flawed expectation dominated US policy under the Bush administration and as a result has strengthened China's position at the US's expense. Meanwhile, China increasingly resents US demands that it lean on Pyongyang for Washington's benefit.

Even if China persuades the DPRK to exercise restraint, Pyongyang's policies suggest it believes that it can execute risky and provocative measures because Beijing and Moscow will provide diplomatic cover. So even if the Six-Party Talks resume as the DPRK, Russia, and China are all insisting, they are likely to break down quickly. Clearly a new approach is needed.

While Washington can stall resumption of the talks, it cannot withdraw from them without incurring very high costs in Asia and beyond. It must find a new source of leverage within this framework since the current process cannot bring about real progress and is likely to end in a stalemate with the US, Japan, and South Korea on one side and Russia, China, and North Korea on the other, replicating the Cold War divide in Northeast Asia.

Washington's new approach must consist first of a much more robust and direct engagement directly with North Korea and second, a reshaping and reconceiving of the six-party process. This process is not merely about North Korean disarmament. Rather, it is about creating a new, legitimate, and enduring peaceful order in Northeast Asia where all the parties, including North Korea, can participate securely. While the DPRK's future is open-ended, we must treat it as if it is a durable and legitimate state capable of making and implementing commitments made to other players. The notion that we do not negotiate with "evil," while popular, contradicts all notions of sound diplomacy aimed at preventing war.

Moreover, predictions of imminent North Korean collapse have not been borne out. Despite withering crises, the regime has survived and is undergoing a succession transition. While this transition may be a major source of its provocative behavior, it also is clear that no external source has much influence over Pyongyang, so North Korea has gained a certain measure of stability. Moreover, its possession of nuclear weapons increases its interlocutors' interest in its stability, not its disintegration.

Consequently, we cannot negotiate North Korea's nuclear disarmament without a much more direct, albeit protracted, and rocky engagement with Pyongyang within the six-party framework. But given the present situation, considerations of inter-allied unity and the domestic political equation in the US, South Korea, and Japan will impede direct engagement for a long time. Moreover, to get that engagement North Korea will have to make an equivalent concession so that the US can justify this discussion to its allies and domestic opposition.

To begin, we must reorganize the six-party process to incentivize the DPRK to accept the idea of engagement. The administration's reset policy with Russia gives us the opening to do so. Although the administration has emphasized collaboration with Russia in Europe, the Gulf, Afghanistan, and on arms control, it has been silent regarding cooperation in East Asia. We have sent emissaries to all the other players in the talks to discuss recent events but not Moscow. Neither US scholarship nor policy takes Russia seriously as an Asian actor. This frustrates Moscow, especially in 2009-10 when it took determined steps to portray itself as an Asian player.

Hitherto, it has almost always identified itself with Chinese positions on Korea, yet Russia has ever more overt misgivings about China's growing military power. These are evident in difficulties over arms sales, Chinese interest in the Arctic, and China's *Great Stride* exercises of 2009. Russia also faces the danger of dominant Chinese economic and thus political influence in its Far East, and more than anyone else is sufficiently alarmed about Korea to claim that the peninsula was on the brink of war in September. It has placed Far Eastern troops on high alert. Its *Vostok-2010* exercises of

June-July 2010 are an accurate barometer of its fears concerning both North Korea and China. Yet so long as Washington neglects it as an Asian actor, Moscow will turn primarily to Beijing and thus undermine its own standing in the Asian power balance.

It is within US power to redress this balance. A US initiative treating Russia as a serious East Asian partner, engaging in a real dialogue on regional security threats, and a strong public expression of US willingness to invest in the Russian Far East in return for real guarantees of that investment would likely elicit a favorable Russian response. Russia benefits greatly by having a US option with which to counter China. While it would not be an ally or even a full partner with the US, that offer could move it some distance from the virtual lockstep it has been in with China on Korea.

Such an initiative might also make North Korea take notice because it would no longer be able to count on Russian protection and Beijing would probably not want to be left alone with North Korea in these talks against everyone else. Those trends could materially affect both Beijing's and Pyongyang's calculus of interests and policies.

While such an initiative must be coordinated with Japan and South Korea, that is not an insuperable problem despite Russo-Japanese tensions over the Kurile Islands. Historically, the US has supported Japan's claim in keeping with a century-long policy of separating Japan and Russia from each other. But Asia has changed and a resurgent Japan is unlikely unless the alliance breaks down. Today's issues are a rising China that upsets all previous strategic considerations and North Korea's nuclear status. We would probably be doing Japan a service if we tell it to accept Russia's 1956 offer of two of the four Kurile islands as the best it will get for now and that the dangers posed by a nuclear North Korea and a rising China that defends it outweigh the benefits of domestic posturing for unattainable territories. Russia could then add its leverage to a US plan to engage North Korea within the six-party framework as China and others have recommended. Then it might be possible to get North Korea back to the table under conditions acceptable to the other parties and with the promise of expanded direct US engagement.

This initiative might fail. But we must recognize that we are facing an impasse that will only become more dangerous. Second, we must accept that the previous policy has failed and that the current process cannot deliver. Engaging Russia preserves the six-party process with a different dynamic, strengthens the Asian equilibrium of power, and opens the way to direct discussions with North Korea that are essential and in both our and North Korea's interest unless we wish to see it collapse or become a Chinese satellite. It also will alter the trajectory of Russo-Chinese relations and prevent a consolidation of the Russo-Chinese partnership that currently threatens to marginalize Russia as an Asian player and which many scholars have warned constitutes potentially a strategic threat to US power and interests.

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