



First things first in the Six-Party Talks: verify and implement

by James L. Schoff

James L. Schoff (jschoff@ifpa.org) is associate director of Asia-Pacific studies at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and co-author of "Nuclear Matters in North Korea: Building a multilateral response for future stability in Northeast Asia."

The Six-Party Talks will reconvene this week after a nine-month hiatus. Although the agenda should be clear to all participants, there are conflicting messages from various capitals that threaten to distract the negotiators. Pyongyang says it is not prepared to move into phase 3 of the talks (i.e., nuclear dismantlement) until it receives all the energy assistance and political benefits it was promised under phase 2. Fair enough -- if North Korea means that it won't start shipping spent nuclear fuel rods out of the country this summer. But this better not mean that Pyongyang will drag its feet on verification procedures or detailed planning for nuclear dismantlement. That can, and must, begin now.

Meanwhile, Washington and Beijing seem to be skipping past phase 3 at times and have mentioned issues that should only be considered once dismantlement is well under way. China's ambassador to the UN, for example, suggested that his country will propose later this year the lifting of UN sanctions on North Korea that were imposed after the North's nuclear test in October 2006. This is an action that should only be exchanged for the removal of nuclear material from North Korea, and that is nearly impossible before the end of the year, unless the process of removing, cooling, and packaging spent fuel from the mothballed Yongbyon reactor speeds up to an unimaginable degree.

U.S. chief negotiator Christopher Hill recently spoke at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington and spent much of the time on setting up "lasting mechanisms for peace and security" and trying to get the six-party process to "address some of the broader issues as we go forward post-denuclearization." He asked the audience of academics and policy specialists for ideas on how to make this happen.

Our suggestion: forget long-term goals and take first-things first in the six-party process. Verify North Korea's nuclear declaration and prepare to implement the economic assistance and nuclear dismantlement components of the agreement. All institution-building efforts should be focused on solving near-term logistical and political problems associated with two goals: verification and implementation. By doing this, an organization or management structure will develop organically, and trust will emerge slowly as nuclear risks are reduced in a manner that corresponds to greater economic development activity and political engagement.

To be fair, six-party negotiators have also said that developing a verification mechanism is the main agenda item for this round of Six-Party Talks, so let's hope that the comments above are a mere sideshow...because the verification and implementation challenges require undivided attention. For example, it is inconceivable that the United States will normalize relations with North Korea before fissile material is moved out of the country and the North has rejoined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), so a future home for the plutonium will have to be found and the terms of NPT reentry negotiated. This phase will also include devising mutually acceptable verification and monitoring procedures, and it is possible that North Korea will insist on discussing initial planning for a light-water reactor during this time. All this suggests that North Korean denuclearization could take years, not months.

Verifying Pyongyang's nuclear declaration in phase 3 will be much more difficult and contentious than the disablement phase. Disablement was characterized by relatively clear and concrete steps that could be observed and evaluated objectively. It was also a predominately U.S.-led operation. Now the most important single question is how much weapons-useable plutonium North Korea possesses (i.e., is Pyongyang's declared amount accurate). The answer must be agreed by all six parties, and the documentation supporting that conclusion has to be maintained in some collective fashion so that future governments can refer to it when necessary. Then, negotiators will make arrangements for the plutonium to be shipped out of North Korea. Planning and paying for this will not be easy.

We also cannot forget how important questions about uranium enrichment and proliferation are to the future viability of the six-party process, because they are critical to building trust and maintaining confidence over the long term. The United States will not be able to move forthrightly toward normalization with North Korea if serious suspicions linger on these issues; if so, tentative follow-through by Washington will only feed doubt in Pyongyang about America's true intentions.

Enrichment and proliferation activities are also the most difficult to verify and monitor, which is why involvement of the other four parties is vital to a mutually acceptable process. Both sides have to compromise and neither will see risk reduced to zero, but there are ways to reduce risk to acceptable levels and improve the current situation through multilateral action. Solving these near-term, tangible challenges regarding verification and implementation will lay a solid foundation for a future regional security mechanism...not the other way around.

Of course, the economic dimension to this puzzle is also important, and there has been precious little coordination

among the six parties or international financial institutions (IFIs) to develop a shared assessment of North Korea's economy and a complementary assistance program. The economic engagement picture is much more complicated than simply providing food, fuel oil, and related energy assistance. North Korea's cross-border trade with China and South Korea continues to increase, despite a recent chill between Pyongyang and Seoul, and nongovernmental organizations and the World Food Program are still active in the DPRK. Other IFIs are poised to become more involved, but how will the six parties manage a potential "middle period" when denuclearization is not yet complete, but economic and development activity in North Korea is growing? In this situation, there is a danger that the parties will lose control of economic levers in the negotiations, which could undermine both denuclearization and economic development objectives. The economic piece is a crucial part of overall implementation.

Eventually, the six parties (or variations and subsets thereof) will begin talking in earnest about a so-called peace regime on the Korean Peninsula to manage the formal end of the Korean War and about creating a regional security mechanism that can begin tackling some of the issues Ambassador Hill talked about in his remarks at CSIS last week. For now, however, the six parties must solidify the gains they've so achieved, by verifying North Korea's statements about its plutonium nuclear program, and by preparing a practical plan for implementing its dismantlement while faithfully upholding all the related political and economic commitments. This will create a nascent institutional capacity that the next U.S. president and the other six-party leaders can build upon in coming years and perhaps bring peace and reconciliation to Korea and long-term stability in Northeast Asia.

Applications are now being accepted for the 2008-2009 Pacific Forum Vasey Fellow position. Details, including an application form, can be found at the Pacific Forum web site [<http://www.csis.org/experts/fellows/vasey/>].