



The Six-Party Talks – Getting beyond the impasse

by William T. Pendley

The major emphasis of the Six-Party Talks has been to get the most contentious states – the United States and the DPRK – to the table for negotiations. This emphasis continues despite the fact that there is nothing on the table to serve as a basis for serious negotiations, witness the latest failed attempt at the recent ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Kuala Lumpur. The Sept. 19, 2005 Statement of Principles – like many that preceded it – is far too broad and vague. The positions of the U.S. and DPRK are well known but represent extreme demands that neither state shows any intention of being the first to abandon. Those who urge direct bilateral negotiations fail to recognize both the inherent advantages of multilateral negotiations as well as the fact that bilateral negotiations would be foredoomed to failure given the history of the last bilateral negotiations and the manner in which the Agreed Framework collapsed.

This impasse will continue if the emphasis and direction are not corrected and the advantage of multilateral negotiations is not activated. The success or failure of the Six-Party Talks does not rest on direct negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea. North Korea seeks direct negotiations because it recognizes the advantages that it has in such a format. International and domestic pressure would be exerted primarily on U.S. negotiators to make all compromises. If the U.S. did not cave in to the usual North Korean promises for future actions while maintaining its nuclear weapons-related facilities but only in return for up-front aid, recognition and security guarantees, the U.S. would be portrayed as the cause of failure in the negotiations for not being “forthcoming enough.” The U.S. has been there before and the current administration apparently does not intend to make that mistake again.

North Korea’s neighbors must reorient their role and emphasis. They have the greatest stake in a successful outcome of these negotiations. China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia need to take a leadership role in fashioning a basis for realistic negotiations. They need to examine in detail the positions of the U.S. and North Korea and develop a phased roadmap as a basis for serious negotiations. This roadmap must provide for North Korea’s security concerns and economic conditions. It must likewise ensure that U.S. concerns on proliferation are met. It should insist on an immediate freeze of all reprocessing and enrichment activities in North Korea under international verification during negotiations as a condition for continued economic assistance. To defuse the current crisis atmosphere, it should also require a moratorium on both major military exercises in the vicinity of Korea and missile tests during negotiations.

Such a roadmap would require compromises by all parties and should reject the most extreme demands of both the U.S. and DPRK. The DPRK would have to accept the immediate end of all reprocessing and enrichment activities under international verification and the destruction of such facilities as the price for maintaining a nuclear deterrent and continuing to receive international economic assistance and security guarantees. The U.S. would have to accept the DPRK possession of a few nuclear weapons, renew its security guarantees, and abandon non-military related sanctions as the price for ending North Korean reprocessing and enrichment activities under international supervision. Regional states would have to provide economic assistance and security guarantees as part of any effective roadmap.

Such a roadmap would require incentives and penalties related to each step in implementation. This requires a commitment from the regional states to cut off all economic assistance to Pyongyang if it fails to meet its responsibilities in the roadmap. The failure of the Six-Party Talks is largely because of the lack of such a commitment, which has allowed the DPRK to dictate the pace of negotiations since there are really no penalties for failing to negotiate in good faith. Regional states should be prepared to go forward with economic assistance and other benefits for the DPRK if the U.S. fails to accept a reasonable roadmap or fails to meet its requirements under it.

Multilateral negotiations permit the parties to reach compromises between widely separated and confrontational positions that threaten international peace and security. These compromises, possible in multilateral negotiations, would normally be far more difficult to accept in bilateral negotiations. That advantage has largely been lost in the Six-Party Talks because of the absence of leadership by the four regional states. It is past time for China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia to take the initiative to place a roadmap on the table as a basis for serious negotiations. The U.S. should urge them to act now.

Some will argue that such an approach abdicates U.S. leadership to China and others. True leadership, however, recognizes and supports diplomatic methods that have the potential to work. Others will continue to push extreme and unrealistic positions and cite statements by Clinton and Bush that the U.S. will never accept a North Korea with nuclear weapons. That rhetoric flies in the face of the reality that was accepted at the time of the 1994 negotiations of the Agreed Framework: that Pyongyang might have three to five nuclear weapons. Rhetoric is never a substitute for facing reality.

The Six-Party Talks can move beyond the current impasse and provide an outcome that reduces tension in Northeast Asia while protecting U.S. interests and reducing the dangers of additional proliferation both within and beyond the region.

Multilateral negotiations can achieve such an outcome but only if the four regional states move beyond merely focusing on facilitating what is essentially a bilateral approach. Effective diplomacy is not merely dialogue or showing up at meetings, but meeting challenges with realistic proposals for solutions. The four regional states must now develop and place on the table as a foundation for serious negotiations a realistic roadmap to solve the North Korean nuclear weapons issue. Without such a foundation for negotiations, the current impasse will continue and increase the probability of failure and collapse for the Six-Party Talks.

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