



Six-Party Talks Prospects by Ralph A. Cossa

President Bush's recent offer to provide Pyongyang with written assurances that the U.S. does not intend to attack North Korea and the North's willingness "to consider" this offer provide the basis, however tentative and contentious, for a negotiated solution to the current nuclear stand-off on the Korean Peninsula. But even if the North really does return to the bargaining table – and this is by no means assured – a long and difficult road lies ahead in the search for common ground between the two primary antagonists in this six-party drama. The key to a successful outcome remains the willingness of the other four actors – China, Japan, Russia, and especially South Korea – to stand firmly behind Washington's central demand: that Pyongyang "fully, verifiably, and irreversibly" abandon its nuclear weapons programs.

While President Bush's comments (during the APEC Leaders Meeting in Bangkok last month) demonstrated some U.S. flexibility as to how that goal is ultimately achieved – as opposed to the previous "all quids before any quos" U.S. approach – the end result (rightfully) remains non-negotiable. Most importantly, references to a "phased approach" notwithstanding, Washington's offer of multilateral security assurances remains "conditioned on verifiable progress" toward the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program.

The North's agreement "in principle" to return to the six-party talks is also conditioned, upon the U.S. "putting into practice the proposal for a package solution based on the principle of simultaneous actions." North Korea previously described these simultaneous actions as follows: Pyongyang would "declare its will to scrape its nuclear program" in return for Washington signing a (bilateral) non-aggression pact and establishing diplomatic relations with the North. At that point, the two sides could then discuss verification measures (and an economic assistance package).

It's no wonder Washington has said that "'simultaneity' is not a word that we would use," while being careful not to reject the concept out-of-hand: "We'll be talking from our proposals; if they want to come and talk from theirs, that's fine," commented State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

Over-optimistic interpretations emanating from Seoul and Beijing notwithstanding, it is important to note that the North has not dropped its demand for a "legally binding" bilateral U.S.-DPRK Non-Aggression Pact. Nor has it agreed, in principle or otherwise, to accept multilateral security assurances as a substitute. Even its willingness to consider the Bush proposal was cast strictly in bilateral terms: "We are ready to consider Bush's remarks on the 'written assurances of non-aggression' if they are based on the intention to co-exist with the DPRK," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) quoted a foreign ministry spokesman as saying,

continuing that, "This stance is prompted by the expectation that the DPRK and the U.S. can build confidence and lay a foundation of co-existence in the course of solving issues one after another on the principle of simultaneous actions."

Acceptance of multilateral security assurances will be an important test of Pyongyang's sincerity and intentions. If its current position is driven by genuine security concerns (as Beijing, Seoul, and others contend), a multilateral security guarantee seemingly would provide greater assurance to North Korea than one underwritten by Washington's promises alone. But this would require Pyongyang, finally, to recognize Seoul as a legitimate interlocutor when it comes to issues of peace and security on the Peninsula, something it has steadfastly refused to do – the earlier Four-Party Talks broke down in 1999 in large part over Pyongyang's refusal to agree to Seoul being a signatory on any Peninsula peace accord. The North has, of course, been more than willing to take the South's money (in the form of economic assistance and downright bribes). But, when it comes to Peninsula security issues, it demands to deal bilaterally (and exclusively) with Washington. This must change!

As an aside, it never ceases to amaze me how the South Korean people, who are quick to take affront at every real or imagined slight coming from an American (or Japanese), are so willing to continually turn the other cheek in the face of North Korean insults and affronts, and have criticized rather than praised or thanked Washington for insisting on a ROK-inclusive multilateral approach.

President Bush's willingness to consider multilateral assurances – to find "other ways we can look at, to say exactly what I've said publicly, on paper, with our partners' consent" – is a first step in the right direction. It is now up to Washington to make Pyongyang an offer it can't refuse; one that is crafted jointly with Seoul and Tokyo and vetted and improved in advance by Beijing and Moscow, prior to being tabled at the next round of Six-Party Talks.

The five like-minded parties should offer the North verbal assurance that there will be no attempts to invade North Korea or to actively seek or support efforts aimed at "regime change" provided Pyongyang simultaneously declares a halt to its nuclear weapons programs (including further reprocessing of its spent fuel) and agrees to pursue six-party negotiations in good faith. Written assurances would be provided once International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors are allowed to return to North Korea to begin the verification process, with the assurance being contingent upon continued DPRK cooperation and compliance, including the placing of spent fuel canisters (and any extracted plutonium) back under IAEA safeguards.

Any significant economic assistance package, to include a resumption of suspended heavy fuel oil deliveries, would be

predicated on the introduction of a more intrusive verification regime, with clear penalties spelled out for future non-compliance. Serious negotiations should also begin on a four- or six-party Peace Treaty to replace the 50-year old Armistice.

But first, Pyongyang has to show up at the next meeting and accept, in principle and in practice, multilateral security assurances rather than a bilateral pact with Washington that cuts Seoul out of the security picture.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at pacforum@hawaii.rr.com