

North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons and the Role of the Six-Party Talks

By Young C. Kim

That the recent six-party talks in Beijing yielded no substantive results surprised few observers as most participating countries had openly expressed low expectations about the outcome. No sooner had the talks closed, the North Korean delegates declared them to be of no value, characterizing the Beijing conference as a forum designed for disarming North Korea. The North Korean foreign ministry spokesman swiftly confirmed that the Beijing talks were useless and North Korea would no longer be interested in participating in meetings of that sort. The dominant theme of North Korea's subsequent pronouncements has been that North Korea has no choice but to strengthen its nuclear deterrent. By contrast, his counterpart at the U.S. State Department issued a rather positive statement, albeit cautious and subdued. A comment attributed to a Pentagon official, however, was clearly negative, particularly in reference to the North Korean chief delegate's threat that his country would be prepared to announce its possession of nuclear weapons and to conduct nuclear testing.

This article is an attempt to assess the outcome of the six-party talks by examining the meanings that the talks carried for North Korea and the United States respectively, and to speculate on the prospects for a resolution of the nuclear issue. It is clear that the conference brought several gains and advantages for North Korea. First, it delayed, for the time being at least, any rapid move toward actions by the United Nations (UN) Security Council on the matter. Second, it also made it difficult in the near term for the United States and its allies to move toward the imposition of sanctions against North Korea. Third, North Korea succeeded in achieving its key demand, bilateral talks with the United States, albeit within the frame-

work of the six-party talks. The United States insisted that the bilateral encounters were informal contacts and did not constitute official talks, nonetheless, the U.S. agreement to such an encounter was an important concession. Fourth, North Korea was able to demonstrate to the United States in the eyes of the world a measure of support from other participants for its insistence on "simultaneous" actions, though the word "parallel" preferred by the United States follows immediately to dilute the meaning of the word of simultaneity. It should be pointed out that it has been a principal North Korean demand that any step North Korea may take toward the abandonment of its nuclear program should be accompanied simultaneously by a compensatory, reciprocal action by the United States. Fifth, North Korea was also successful in demonstrating sympathy or understanding of some powers for its rationale regarding the existence of the nuclear program, which justifies the presence of the program by linking it to the perceived policy of hostility and military threat from the Bush administration. It appears that the fact that North Korea's nuclear programs predated the advent of the Bush administration was not particularly germane from the perspective of these participants. Thus, to these participants, the uranium enrichment program – the existence of which the North Korean chief delegate denied at the Beijing meeting, though his senior colleague admitted it last October – and the series of actions North Korea has taken since last fall such as the reactivation of the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel rods may be a justifiable response to the threat from the United States, and that North Korea should be offered various quid

pro quos as an inducement to dismantle its nuclear programs.

Despite all these gains, North Korea's official assessment of the six-party talks was negative, betraying its profound dissatisfaction with the outcome. The assessment is presumably based on its failure to elicit any concessions on substantive issues from the United States. North Korea demanded a fundamental switchover in the U.S. policy of hostility, insisting that the United States meets three benchmarks: the conclusion of a non-aggression treaty, the establishment of diplomatic relations and non-interference in North Korea's economic dealings with third countries. North Korea argued for a phased, reciprocal and simultaneous movement by the two countries toward the implementation of a comprehensive package deal. The North Korean announcements bitterly denounced the United States for rejecting its proposal.

To return to the question of gains, the following gains may be said to have accrued to the United States. First, the United States has succeeded in internationalizing or multilateralizing the nuclear issue, a goal the Bush administration has pursued seriously, particularly since January of this year. The issue will not be dealt with singly by the United States, but by a group of powers of interest and concern. That means that all the leverage and resources collectively available to these powers could be mobilized to bring the maximum pressure to bear upon North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs, and that the responsibility and burden of resolving the issue would be shared. It should be added parenthetically that whether, to what extent, and for what price the other powers would be willing to join the United States in exerting pressure on North Korea remains to be seen. In any event, the initial words of



Representatives of the six nations join hands for a photo session in Beijing – from the left Yabunaka Mitoji of Japan, James Kelly of the United States, Kim Yong-il of North Korea, Wang Yi of China, Alexander Loshkov of Russia and Lee Soo-Hyuck of South Korea

satisfaction uttered by a few U.S. officials about the six-party talks reflected the belief that the foundation or framework for exerting joint pressure has been laid.

Second, the format of the six-party talks enabled the United States to avoid being seen as succumbing to blackmail from North Korea. This is an important consideration for the Bush administration in view of the strong moral revulsion President George W. Bush and his aides have felt about agreeing to North Korea's demand for bilateral talks which they consider as a capitulation to North Korea's intimidation.

Third, it might be easier for the United States to elicit future cooperation from China and Russia in support of U.S. policy. The underlying assumption is that the two countries would have the opportunity to directly observe the behavior of the North Korean delegates and are likely to be more cooperative with the United States in thwarting North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons. In this connection, one should note a bombshell the North Korean chief delegate dropped at the six-party talks. He stated that North

Korea is prepared to announce publicly its possession of nuclear weapons and to conduct nuclear testing. These remarks are said to have caused great dismay and consternation among the participants, including the Chinese and Russian representatives. While some American officials tended to dismiss the remarks as the usual rhetoric, these remarks are bound to strengthen the view of the advocates of hard-line policies in the United States and elsewhere. The prevailing view among policy circles in the United States is that North Korea is determined to build a nuclear arsenal at all costs, that no amount of quid pro quo would dissuade it from the pursuit of nuclear weapons, and only regime change can bring about a fundamental resolution of the issue.

Fourth, the United States may have gained the necessary time to adequately prepare for a contingency involving the use of coercive measures. It would help build a justification for and facilitate the winning of domestic and international support for coercive measures, including possible military action against North Korea.

Fifth, U.S. engagement in multilateral

talks would provide the Bush administration with a convenient and effective justification for the apparent delay, inaction and inability to "resolve" the nuclear issue rapidly and decisively. Electoral considerations would intensify the level of domestic criticism of the administration's approach to the North Korean nuclear issue as well as Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq and the serious problems of postwar reconstruction. The administration would be vulnerable to such criticism in view of the ongoing engagement in Afghanistan, the worsening security situation and instability in Iraq, a deepening crisis in the Middle East, and the volatility and the increasing escalation of the North Korean nuclear issue. To what extent these domestic political considerations will operate to constrain the Bush administration's North Korea policy is difficult to assess. Besides, electoral considerations could exert an impact in either direction; the political leadership may feel constrained to undertake a course of action which would carry major risks or may be tempted to assume a more aggressive posture towards an external adversary than war-

ranted. However, any serious escalatory moves by North Korea could deprive the political leader of the option of a cautious approach, thereby accentuating the second tendency.

The prospects for the resolution of the nuclear issue through the six-party talks are dim. The North Korean leadership is evidently unwilling and probably incapable of making a fundamental decision to jettison its nuclear programs in the absence of a perceived crisis of the first magnitude threatening the imminent collapse of the regime. Incredible as it may seem, it is possible that the North Korean leadership, emboldened by the perceived weakness in the Bush administration, may decide to make an all-out effort to build-up its nuclear arsenal and to continue taking escalatory actions in the months ahead. The grounds for suspecting their miscalculations are many, the most persuasive of which is the repeated "failure" in the eyes of the North Korean leadership of the Bush administration to take decisive punitive action when North Korea crossed with impunity what most analysts thought to be a series of red lines.

The temptation may be irresistible for North Korea to go all the way to the logical end point to create a *fait accompli* while the Bush administration, constrained by a range of factors, continues to profess its belief in the peaceful resolution of the matter through diplomacy. It is possible that the North Korean leaders have miscalculated the intensity of domestic and international constraints operating on the Bush administration.

North Korea may succumb to such a temptation and take a major escalatory action in the near term, thereby jeopardizing the chances for the reconvening of the second round of the six-party talks. Should that happen, the Bush administration would be compelled to respond, attempting to institute a comprehensive array of measures of containment and sanctions against North Korea, both within and outside the framework of the UN. The proliferation security initiative (PSI)-related activities which are already underway

would be expanded and enforced with greater rigor. Should these countermeasures prove to be ineffective, the Bush administration would seriously attempt to bring about a regime change with all the means available short of the use of military force. Any military actions North Korea might initiate against U.S. interests in South Korea or elsewhere under such circumstances would be certain to bring about American military strikes against North Korea.

It cannot be overemphasized that the Bush administration is firm in its determination that North Korean nuclear weapons cannot be tolerated and all the nuclear programs must be dismantled completely, verifiably and irreversibly. The possible damage to the security interests of the United States is deemed to be so profound that the use of force as a last resort would be considered justified. It is difficult to conceive of the circumstances under which the Bush administration would allow North Korea's build-up of a nuclear arsenal to proceed unchallenged with all its implications for proliferation.

Such is a grossly pessimistic scenario. Although it is possible to conceive of such a scenario, its probability is relatively low. A more likely scenario is that as both parties go down the path toward collision, the North Korean leadership may see no alternative but to accept American terms and agree to dismantle the nuclear programs in a verifiable manner. The alternative would be to go to war to face certain destruction of the polity as well as the current leadership. Chairman Kim Jong Il might and could make a decision to abandon the nuclear programs under such circumstances. The danger is that the situation may have already gone out of his control with the two countries having plunged into a military engagement.

Assuming that North Korea refrains from escalating tensions in the next month or two, another round of six-party talks is expected to occur sometime in November. It is unrealistic to expect North Korea to have altered its stance in a fundamental way in a span

of a couple of months in the absence of a sharp deterioration of its relative power position due either to domestic or external developments. The six-party talks are therefore likely to be unproductive, and the two adversaries may travel down the road to a serious confrontation. Such a course would involve the actions of the UN Security Council, leading in due course to the adoption and application of sanctions and containment measures of ever increasing severity. Alternatively, despite the breakdown of the conference, the parties will manage to convene another round of meetings without producing a formula for the resolution of the issue. This process may continue until the actions taken by either of the two major adversaries precipitate the course of developments envisaged in one of the more pessimistic scenarios identified above. The choices North Korea and the United States will make in the months ahead, therefore, will have an enormous impact in shaping the future course of developments in the search for a resolution of the issue.

According to an optimistic scenario, the second round of talks expected to be held in November 2003 will turn out to be a forum for useful, substantive discussions of interest to the parties. The possible progress envisaged involves the clarification of specific security assurances that the United States could offer following a formal declaration by North Korea of its intention to abandon its nuclear programs completely, verifiably and irreversibly. Successive rounds of talks would occur with each round registering incremental progress, leading ultimately to the acceptance of a package deal by the two adversaries. However, the acceptance in principle of a formula for a resolution of the issue is one thing, the problem of working out the specific details of verification and actual implementation are exceedingly difficult. These tasks are beyond the purview of the six-party talks and would have to be worked out subject to the interplay of the different dynamics of power.

In speculating on the prospects of U.S.-North Korean relations, it is

important to take into account a host of factors: the complexity of interests of all the actors, the magnitude of perceived potential injury to their core interests, the fundamental incompatibility between the proposed formulae for conflict resolution and the profundity of mutual distrust and antagonism between the two principal actors. These factors constitute a serious impediment to a resolution by diplomatic negotiations.

Despite these difficulties, a peaceful and diplomatic solution should be possible if North Korea is really prepared to dismantle its nuclear programs in return for the quid pro quo it has specified. If North Korea's willingness is genuine, it is incumbent upon the North Korean leadership to take steps to convince the U.S. leadership of the seriousness of its intention. On the part of the United States, a suitable response would be required. It should rise beyond the pervasive distrust and try earnestly to test the validity of the North Korean proposition by providing North Korea with the opportunity to demonstrate the seriousness of its will to relinquish nuclear weapons. This would require an affirmation of the U.S. government policy to seek a normal, non-antagonistic relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In concrete terms, the United States would have to demonstrate a measure of flexibility in regard to the appropriate timing at which the bold initiatives/incentives might be implemented. The United States could, at least, signal its willingness to begin discussions concerning appropriate forms of security assurances and the timing of their provision in parallel with the actual launching of North Korea's concrete actions to dismantle its nuclear programs.

The most crucial requirement for reaching a political settlement would be the presence of political will on both sides to seek a political solution. But that is precisely what is lacking. In the absence of political will, which in turn is related to and is sustained by the total lack of trust, the chances for an optimistic scenario to materialize are small.

The implications of all this for Japanese interests are clear. There is a direct de facto linkage between the nuclear issue and Japan's normalization of relations with North Korea. This is the policy choice the Japanese government has made. Theoretically, a policy alternative of delinking the two issues is available if the Japanese government is so inclined. As long as the current policy remains in force, however, the lack of progress on the nuclear issue will continue to be a serious hindrance to the normalization of relations between the two countries. Prime Minister Koizumi Jun-ichiro has made the position of the Japanese government absolutely clear that no normalization of relations with North Korea will be realized until the nuclear issue is resolved along with the issues of the abductions and missiles. It will be recalled that the Japanese delegate to the six-party talks formally raised the issue of the abductions together with the nuclear and missile issues at the plenary session as well as the bilateral meetings with the North Korean delegation.

The position of the Japanese government is in part based on the considerations of alliance politics, but it primarily reflects Japan's own security concerns with the nuclear and missile threat emanating from North Korea. From the Japanese perspective, North Korea's development of nuclear weapons constitutes a flagrant violation of the Pyongyang Declaration signed at the conclusion of the Koizumi-Kim summit meeting in September 2002. The Japanese government, however, has been rather reticent on this point.

Japan has adhered to the stance of vigorous opposition to North Korea's nuclear programs and is expected to



Bush and Koizumi at their summit meeting in Crawford, Texas

continue its high profile participation in a variety of actions and measures designed to thwart the nuclear weapons development, and proliferation by North Korea and others of weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems. The policy and actions of the Japanese government in this regard add great strength to the efforts of the United States, thereby contributing to the efficacy of the joint policy objective of complete, verifiable and irreversible elimination of the North Korean nuclear programs. The high degree of trust Bush places in Koizumi, and Japan's role in this regard is aptly expressed in the remarks he made after the conclusion of their summit meeting in Crawford, the "Prime Minister (Koizumi) and I see the problem (North Korea's nuclear issue) in exactly the same way." **JTI**

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