

**Leif-Eric Easley, "Good News and Bad News about Return of Six-Party Talks,"
JoongAng Daily (with *International Herald Tribune*), December 15, 2006, page 7.**

Six-party talks on dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs are to resume December 18th, after being stalled for over a year. It is both good news and bad news that talks resume so soon after North Korea's October 9th underground test of a nuclear device.

There are three pieces of good news. First, the resumption of talks may reduce the chance of crisis escalation, from an inspection-related incident at sea for example. Second, China's efforts to bring North Korea back to the table appear to have involved more pressure than inducements, an indicator of Beijing's increasingly responsible role. Third, both the U.S. and North Korea have demonstrated flexibility ahead of the talks.

U.S. officials have met bilaterally with North Korean counterparts during organizational meetings in Beijing. Washington has reportedly been more specific about what benefits North Korea can receive by giving up its nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, Pyongyang agreed to return to talks without seeing its demand met about the lifting of financial restrictions placed on North Korean funds with suspected connections to illicit activities.

Unfortunately, the resumption of Six-party talks carries bad news as well. It is unlikely that enough time has passed for Pyongyang to make the strategic decision to abandon its nuclear weapons. Despite a strong UN Security Council Resolution, sanctions have not yet been sufficiently coordinated or sustained to alter North Korea's nuclear calculus. Thus, no comprehensive solution can be expected in the present round of talks.

So why are the talks on? Some governments appear to believe that just having meetings can represent successful diplomacy. The theory is that while talks are ongoing, odds go down for such costly contingencies as North Korean military provocations, regime collapse, or regime change from the outside. While there may be truth in this, it is clear that the resumption of talks is a time buying mechanism for North Korea, and perhaps a forum for it to demand recognition as a nuclear power. Pyongyang may plan to extract economic benefits from the talks in exchange for small diplomatic concessions and easily reversible tokens of disarmament.

Knowing this, why did the U.S. push for a resumption of talks? Midterm Congressional elections and staff changes in the Bush administration will have implications for U.S. policy toward North Korea, but plans for this round of talks were underway beforehand. The likely explanation is Washington fears that the international consensus forged after North Korea's nuclear test is losing steam, allowing Pyongyang

space and time to develop further its nuclear and ballistic missile technologies. Consistent with its original design for the Six-party framework, the Bush administration is probably hoping that talks can either achieve roll back of these programs or demonstrate that Pyongyang has no intention of parting with its nuclear weapons, thus putting the onus on Seoul and Beijing to do more to help change the North Koreans' minds.

Given the six parties' different motivations for returning to the table, what can be expected from the present round of talks? It is unlikely that Pyongyang will agree to rejoin the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), report all of its nuclear programs and facilities, or submit to international inspections. The most that can be expected is as follows. The U.S. finesses the release of some frozen North Korean assets by identifying certain funds as legitimate. North Korea agrees to freeze plutonium production, self-imposes a nuclear and ballistic missile test moratorium and closes its October 9th test site. All parties agree to draw up a timeline for dismantlement of North Korea's weapons programs in stages corresponding to economic incentives and security assurances.

More likely than this best-case scenario is that talks will simply produce some form of recommitment to the September 2005 joint statement and establish working groups for implementing parts of the agreement. This would represent progress, but would leave most of the difficult questions (and the producing of actual results) for future negotiations.

Of course, there is always the chance of a breakthrough with the introduction of new thinking. Some reports have suggested there could be steps toward a peace regime on the Korean peninsula or U.S. diplomatic relations with North Korea. Either would be premature until Pyongyang clearly commits to nuclear disarmament.

If North Korea is unwilling to make such a commitment, or if the present round of Six-party talks collapses, then the five parties must unite in convincing Pyongyang that its further pursuit of nuclear weapons will earn it less and less attractive deals in the future. If Six-party talks are ever to succeed, North Korea must be persuaded that its strategic interests will be best served by denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Such persuasion involves talking and incentives, but also requires the imposition of real costs if North Korea refuses to meet its international obligations.

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