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Six-Party Talks: Moderate Aims Fulfilled, Keep an Open Mind

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THE fifth round of the six-party talks in Beijing which recessed last Friday for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in South Korea was widely seen as having achieved little or no progress. However, host China kept up hopes by reiterating that all parties were still committed to the declaration from the previous round in September to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula "at an early date". Indeed, if seen in the context of the moderate goals of the latest round, it would be fair to say that the parties did not leave completely empty-handed.

The six-party multilateral negotiations involved the United States, North and South Korea, Japan, China and Russia. They have witnessed a three-year oscillation of posturing, acute tension, and impasse ever-since the North unilaterally unraveled the 1994 Agreed Framework accords in late 2002. When US officials accused the North of secretly pushing a uranium-enriching programme, Pyongyang expelled United Nations nuclear weapons inspectors, withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and re-activated its nuclear plants. In fact, the Yongbyon nuclear reactor was operating even as the latest round of talks transpired.

During the September talks, a joint statement of principles was drawn up: North Korea would give up its nuclear ambitions and rejoin the NPT soon in exchange for energy assistance, security guarantees and diplomatic recognition. The US would reciprocate by opening a liaison office in Pyongyang and convert the 1953 Korean War armistice into a peace treaty. However a day later after, North Korea demanded a light water nuclear reactor as a precondition for its earlier agreement to be effective.

The current deadlock arises from two competing demands. On one hand, the US wanted to push for progress made previously, craft an international inspections schedule, and establish a framework for denuclearizing the peninsula. On the other, North Korea refused to disarm without obtaining concessions along the process. However, the US is determined that the North dismantle its weapons' programme in an NPT- and IAEA-verifiable manner before handing out concessions.

Modest goal in Beijing

While the overall goal of these multilateral talks is an eventual nuclear-free Korean peninsula, the objectives of the three-day talks in Beijing were more modest. This short session of negotiations was not expected to have major breakthroughs in the first place. The

issues were vast and may take years to resolve, and there indeed exist differences between parties over strategies of implementations. President Bush revealed as much when he noted that while a nuclear-free Korean peninsula was a "noble goal", patience was required in navigating this difficult issue. He emphasized that the US must keep sending a "consistent message".

While the basic positions of the North Koreans and Americans remained unchanged at the Beijing talks, the fifth session could help clear some ambiguities about the North's seriousness in fulfilling that two-month-old pledge of abandoning its nuclear development programmes in return for energy aid and security guarantees.

Indeed, it could be said that the moderate aims of the talks have been fulfilled -- namely to send an unvarying message to the North that the Bush administration is willing to negotiate, pledge non-aggression, and create a favourable environment for further discussion. As affirmed by chief US negotiator Christopher Hill, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the negotiations were a "useful first opportunity" to exchange views and discuss implementations. The talks were amiable; all parties "knew what they signed up for" and demonstrated commitment to the process. North Korea in particular showed willingness to move forward and to operationalize the principles, and the light water reactor was not a big factor during talks.

The talks may not have been all smooth-sailing. But the major stumbling block was not the nuclear dispute but the US' financial sanctions on North Korea. Pyongyang had charged that Washington's recent sanctions on several North Korean companies for alleged counterfeiting and arms proliferation violated the principles of the September agreement, and was proof of US hostility. The US responded that those were law enforcement issues and not six-party issues. Indeed, the North raised issues that had little to do with the talks' agenda, and can be construed as Pyongyang's usual feet-dragging tactics. This is unsurprising as Pyongyang has long maintained a negotiating policy based on threats, tactical withdrawals and indignant diatribes. As it turned out, the two sides subsequently agreed to discuss these issues separately.

North Korea's Offer

What is most significant however is the revelation after the end of the talks that North Korea had offered a "five-step plan" to abandon its nuclear weapons programme. Pyongyang proposed to halt and dismantle its nuclear tests and facilities, and eventually rejoin the NPT and accept IAEA safeguards – but only after receiving concessions from the US. Analysts cautioned that this is not new, and that the real issue is whether they will fulfill this without asking for concessions first. Sure enough, after the Beijing talks, North Korea's top negotiator, Vice-Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan challenged the US to prove its trustworthiness by making the first move – and that the North "will act if action is made".

However, their surprise turnaround is illustrative. The five-step plan is arguably the North's most trenchant indication yet that it is seriously contemplating a non-nuclear future. While Hill had indicated simultaneous interest and caution pertaining to the North's "fundamental steps within steps" offer, the Bush administration flatly rejected a "compensation-for-freeze" possibility. But should the North's commitment to the principles indeed be attested to, the pressure could be on the US to review its "no rewards first" policy.

Keep an Open Mind

Implementing the September accord appears a long way off, with a stalemate persisting between Pyongyang and Washington. But the latest round of talks effectively conveyed the message that the US is willing to negotiate and harbours no aggressive intentions toward the North. North Korea's nuclear programme will be discussed bilaterally at the APEC meeting and the 21 participating leaders will pass an unprecedented special statement calling for a resolution to North Korea's nuclear problem on November 19. It will fortify the efforts made during the Beijing talks and send another clear, unified message to Pyongyang before the six-party negotiations resume in the coming December or January. While the onus is still on the US to ensure that this momentum for a denuclearized Korean peninsula is not lost, it might also do well to keep an open and adroit mind to North Korea's entreaties.

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