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The Six-Party Regime in Addressing the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Gains, Merits and Limitations*

(First draft)

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In the prevailing international relations, multilateral conflict-managing regimes provide a primary framework for both securing a more balanced setting to cultivate trust and confidence between the conflicting sides and amplifying a binding power of implementing any reached agreement. As a sense-making case, the six-party talks in Beijing have worked properly so far in dealing with the Korean nuclear crisis and prove to be an inspiring model of addressing major regional and even global conflicts. As widely believed, however, the full credibility of the regional conflict-controlling mechanism awaits further demonstration in the days ahead. After all, only tangible progress promised by the negotiating nations and one decisive consensus among them, particularly between North Korea and the United States, could justify this multi-sided arrangement's effectiveness to achieve the aim of denuclearization on the peninsula and see a conflict-free Northeast Asia.

The Six-Party Talks: An Attempt to Tackle the Korean Nuclear Issue

August 27-29 2003, the first round of the six-party talks on the Korean nuclear issue was held in Beijing, and the negotiating nations included the DPRK (North Korea), the United States, China, Russia, the ROK (South Korea) and Japan. The kick-start of this multilateral mechanism is considered as an outcome of the related governments' increasing interaction and good expectations and its immediate mission was to seek a reasonable solution to the escalating nuclear crisis. Besides the dynamics from Beijing and Moscow, the leaders of the US, ROK and Japan also expressed heightened interests after a series of high-level visits and consultations. Washington even showed its willingness to offer Pyongyang a written security guarantee if North Korea came about to cooperate with the emerging multilateral regime to drive this process forward. As rightfully observed, North Korea, at minimum and perhaps for the first time, began to seriously envision the unmistakable fact that the other five negotiating nations would never accept the prospect of a nuclear Korean Peninsula.¹

* Unless otherwise stated, this paper contains the author's personal views.

¹ Balbina Y. Hwang, “The Six-Party Talks: Much Ado about Nothing?” *The Heritage Foundation, Policy Research and Analysis*, 2003/9/8, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm333.cfm>

From the very beginning of the six-party talks, Beijing clarified its real intention of launching this initiative that the peace and stability in Northeast Asia would have to be maintained and a nuclear-free Korean peninsula must be achieved; and North Korea's security concern should be reasonably and credibly compromised. Beijing saw this multilateral format as a necessary platform to address the Korean nuclear problem in the prevailing context. Also, Beijing naturally believes that a workable multilateral regime would effectively curb Washington's unilateral action, especially possible use of force.² Actually, promoting it as the most preferred formula, Beijing has realized that the significance of this talk paradigm involving multiple interested nations would have to be eventually bolstered and even justified by certain tangible progress in envisioning the identified basic concerns rather than the talk process. Among these concerns are should be the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, Pyongyang's security, political and economic benefits, and an enduring stability in this region. While Washington believed the six-party regime would be a reliable way to deal with North Korea, however, the Bush administration seemed not really convinced to find a negotiated settlement of the crisis but preoccupied with a permanent solution through changing the King Jong-Il regime.³

Some six months later, the opportunity for the next round of negotiations began to be ripe after several impressive bilateral meetings and consultations in different capitals. Beijing made an effort to have the arrangement workable. Difficulties around the preparations for this round proved to be tremendous. Just before the new talks, in view of high expectations from various sides and the complexity of the Korean nuclear issue, all the negotiating governments generally expressed their willingness to make the talks regularized and institutionalized, which was articulated by then US Secretary of State, Collin Powell. This evolving inclination could be explained away as the perceived lack of confidence in securing a success by the existing irregular arrangements. Unfortunately, the lingering fear that the presumable traditional bonds of interests, namely US, Japan and ROK coalition on one side and North Korea, China and Russia on the other would dominate the negotiations by forging two extremely different approaches still works. Possibly worse, any virtual pattern of "five versus one" talks, as Washington used to expect, would decisively hamstring the multilateral crisis-solving mechanism. In addition, some irrelevant developments, such as alleged North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens and the forthcoming US presidential election tended to make the prospect of the multi-sided dialogues more uncertain and unpredictable.

To call for institutionalized regime of the prevailing six-party talks seems to suggest the less likelihood of bringing about any substantial results at the second round of talks, but this helped set a bottom-line goal to make this format workable. As eloquently argued, a regularized mechanism of negotiations aimed to meet Northeast Asian security concerns in general and the Korean nuclear issue in specific could create some identifiable advantages, among which could be to accelerate the process of peacefully defusing the Korean nuclear crisis by fixing the timeframes, venues, chief negotiators; and make projects coherently dovetailed and share information and intelligence in order to remove misperceptions among all the participating parties. And it would also help enhance the efficiency of the talks itself. Despite these apparent merits, Beijing become aware of unavoidable hardness of achieving this objective in view of troublesome happenings around the core issue at the intervals of the talks.

Many believed that the second round of the nuclear discussion would never become an event of bringing Washington and Pyongyang closer and narrowing the divergences between the two nations, but several promising gains could still be spotted: the timing for the next round of negotiations worked out (before the end of June 2004); the first joint working group set up; and the mechanism of resolution within the six-party framework

² John S. Park, "Inside Multilateralism: The Six-Party Talks", *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2005, Vol.28, No.4, pp.83-84

³ Phillip C. Saunders, "What to Expect from the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Nuclear Crisis", Center for Non-proliferation Studies, 2003/8/25, <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/week/030825.htm>

confirmed. All this, at least from Beijing's perspective, eventually raised the expectation for designing a preliminary "road map". It could be seen as a meaningful step toward the exploration of a final solution to the crisis in terms of the recognized core issue being seriously touched upon and the bottom lines set by both Pyongyang and Washington for the following talks became clear and unmistakable, despite the approaches of the two key roles of this crisis remaining poles apart. Perhaps more importantly, Pyongyang visibly became less bellicose and confrontational, and one found that the North Korean diplomats attending the talks to be some more professional interlocutors than expected before. According to US negotiating officials, the second round of the six-party dialogues in Beijing could be an encouraging success in terms of North Korea's move toward giving up its nuclear programs in a "complete, verifiable and irreversible way". In the meanwhile, it was argued that a unique pattern of multi-sided dialogue began to be established, which has never seen before in Northeast Asia. Despite no more than expected earlier, the third round of the talks saw some common ground in agreeing that a freeze of Pyongyang's nuclear programs should be an initial step despite a huge gap of views of the United States and North Korea.⁴ In addition, the exchange of bad-blooding words between North Korea and the United States, especially around the American presidential election seemed to exacerbate the atmosphere for further constructive dialogues within the six-party regime.⁵

In early February 2005, Pyongyang voiced an unexpected statement saying that it would quit the six-party talks for an indefinite period. Further complicated the issue, this threatening posture severely discouraged Washington that had been eager to resume the multilateral channel dialogues through a series of diplomatic maneuvers. Just a couple of weeks later, however, Pyongyang seemed to renew its interest in resuming participation in the six-party format. This volatile attitude may confirm the assumption that North Korea's disobedience and stubbornness in expressing its nuclear aspiration and withdrawal from the Beijing dialogue format never means its absolute boycott of the multi-party talks for further outcomes but raising the stakes to secure greater concessions in the next negotiations. It is widely believed that China has not accepted Pyongyang's passiveness in taking part in the six-party meetings, let alone the likelihood of North Korea keeping itself away from the multi-sided track. But China has showed certain understanding of several basic demands of interest from Pyongyang and thus felt hard to woo Pyongyang back to the negotiating table without a corrected formula to accommodate North Korea. For instance, in theory and by international law, Pyongyang should indeed enjoy a right to peacefully exploit nuclear energy. It should have been no problem if Washington would not suspect its intention of developing nuclear weapons under the cover of civilian projects.⁶ Besides Beijing, the other participating interlocutors including Seoul, Moscow, Tokyo, and Washington in particular have found it extremely difficult to allow Pyongyang absent. Thus North Korea's refreshed toughness in dealing with the crisis after the third round of the Beijing talks tended to produce mixed effects: Pyongyang raises its bargaining chip for acquiring further interest assurance; and at the same time, a proper window of opportunity of reaching a consensus in principle among the negotiating partners came.

Diplomatically, while the ongoing minor advances and promising gains brought about by the six-party regime, North Korea has never given up the basic tone of its policy option of seeking a major bilateral chance to negotiate its concerns and interests between Pyongyang and Washington. What North Korea has voiced and done shortly before resuming participation of the new round of the talks in Beijing just highlights its preference to do this. However, Pyongyang develops a growing awareness of the fact that its tough approach of boycotting the six-party negotiations would prove to be counterproductive as far as both finding a reasonable resolution of the nuclear issue and meeting its own interest concerns. Despite some understandable reasons by North Korea of showing very limited interest in the six-party talks and preferring to the direct interaction with the United States,

⁴ "N. Korea 'wants six-party talks'", *CNN News*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/asiapcf/09/13/nkorea.talks/>

⁵ Zhang Jiaoshou, "The Road to Talks," *Beijing Review*, No. 33, September 2005

⁶ Shi Yongming, "Talks' Success Rests on Greater Trust," *Beijing Review*, No.33, September 2005

there has been no immediate realistic ground to make it happen in the prevailing context. Pyongyang's unyielding stance on the nuclear programs could be a calibrated tactics of guardedly underpinning its known position in the upcoming round of bargains, which has been regarded by Pyongyang as a compulsive step to deal with Washington as well as other related players. Most possibly, North Korean announcement of possessing the nuclear weapons and quitting the six-party regime in February 2005 is a manifestation of bluff and blackmail and an instrument to seek larger room for maneuver rather than, as widely feared, becoming determined to move across the "redline". Thus, one can easily suspect the credibility of declared Pyongyang existing nuclear arsenal, despite the safe confirmation that the substantial nuclear programs have been underway and continue to go ahead in North Korea.

The Joint Statement of September 19 and the Negotiators' Changing Stance

The fourth round of the six-party dialogues starting in July 2005 eventually yields several visible results that are epitomized in some preliminary guidelines. Being the result of reciprocal compromise and concessions, certain encouraging signs for promising tangible advances appear between the lines of the Joint Statement of September 19, covering wide-ranging international concerns, though there is no substantial breakthrough in bridging the huge gap of requirements between the United States and North Korea. According to the deal made in Beijing, both the United States and North Korea make their commitments respectively and confirm the principle of the "commitment for commitment and action for action". Pyongyang promises the abandonment of its nuclear arsenal and current nuclear programs and early return to the track of the NPT regime and the resumption of IAEA safeguards of its nuclear facilities. On the other hand, the United States makes its non-invasion pledge, ensuring that there is no American nuclear presence on the Korean Peninsula and that it has no intention to strike any nuclear or conventional attacks on Pyongyang. Furthermore, both sides pledge to take steps to go towards the normalization of their bilateral relations. A major consensus was reached: Pyongyang claims its legitimacy to exploit nuclear energy for a peaceful purpose and the other negotiating governments express of respect of the demand and agree to discuss the provision of the light-water reactor to meet North Korea's energy need at an appropriate time.⁷ Besides, other major issues mentioned in principle in the September 19 Joint Statement include security cooperation in Northeast Asia, a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, economic and energy assistance and security assurances to Pyongyang, and North Korea-Japan relations.

There are several identified factors that have promoted the calibrated success of the fourth round of six-party talks marked by the signature of the "Joint Statement". A balanced assessment of them will help materialize the specific and tangible objectives in the framework of the multilateral dialogues and beyond. First of all, the trend of nuclear development on the Korean peninsula has begun to make it for the nations concerned a more pressing imperative to prevent the crisis from escalation and even out of control. This sense of urgency was enhanced by Pyongyang's unexpected declaration of actual possession of nuclear weapons and unilateral quitting the six-party talks for an indefinite time in February 2005, and furthered by Washington's instant reaction by reinforcing its strategic deployment and concerted capability of military maneuvers with the allies. At the same time, there seemed no existing convergence among the negotiating partners on what options could be used to ease the worsen situation resulting from these negative developments. Normally a choice has to be made between sustained patience and flexibility and resorting to the augment of pressure and sanctions. One could hardly rule out the likelihood of bringing this thorny problem to the UN Security Council and even increasing pressure on Beijing to suspend the Pyongyang's desperately needed energy supply.

In this connection, the fourth round of Beijing negotiations turned out to be a crucial juncture that

⁷ "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks," Beijing, 19 September 2005, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/dslbj/t212707.htm>

determines whether the multilateral regime could sustain and even survive. All the parties involved realized that the credibility of this paradigm for consulting the nuclear crisis on the peninsula will be considerably reduced if there would still no any visible progress at the resumed round of talks and thereby all endeavors previously made could irreversibly abort. The mutual perception of urgency definitely urged Washington and Pyongyang to try any sense-making progress on a reciprocal basis, apart from Beijing who had every reason to exploit that critical chance of brokering an agreement. Visibly, the duration of the talks became relatively prolonged (from July 29 to August 10) and both the schedule and modalities of the meeting saw some modifications. Another impressive improvement is a chain of bilateral and parallel meetings between North Korea and the United States, Japan, and ROK respectively during the first phase of the negotiation. The serious bilateral engagements proved to be quite helpful for the unfolding of the new round of the multi-national consultations. The “meeting within a meeting” design helped remove the misperceptions in advance and provide a foundation for the following consultations among all the parties.⁸ Moreover, for many outside observers, the delicate arrangement of the second phase of it seemed to promise certain significant progress and confirmed a determination to make something different from the previous ones. As commented by Wu Dawei, China’s chief negotiator, “We decide to take a recess so that we can reach the peak more smoothly. This is an important and positive outcome of the first phase of this round of talks”⁹. It provided a rare opportunity for both Beijing and Washington to secure a last-minute deal: the former offered a foundation and the latter closed a bargain.¹⁰

As a positive change, Washington’s evolving approach of pragmatism towards the phased results has extremely powerful input in the conceived design for the future. A positive signal has begun to be sensed by a more flexible and responsive, albeit not less absolute, position on the nuclear issue from the Bush administration. US shift to a more practical posture is marked by no longer keeping the claim, at least temporarily, that Pyongyang must account for its presumably hidden HEU (highly enriched uranium)-based nuclear program and that North Korea must promptly suspend or freeze its ongoing weapons-grade plutonium programs. The seemingly softened US stance also shows its tentative interest in reconsidering and possibly readjusting its earlier position that highlights a non-reward/aid pattern during the period of freeze. Perhaps more importantly, Washington lowering of its negotiating threshold is reflected in a conditional acceptance of Pyongyang’s right to develop a civilian nuclear capability by agreeing to discuss the provision of the light-water reactor “at an appropriate time”. By doing so, Washington “successfully extricated itself from being blamed for the predicament”.¹¹ One even tends to believe that Washington begins to dilute a pressing but simply unrealistic agenda of transition from a freeze to a complete dismantlement. This perceived elasticity has proved to be considerably helpful for finding one highly coordinated position and meaningful cooperation, contributing greatly to the emergence of the “Joint Statement”. According to some Chinese analysts, this shift in US stance indicates that a relatively resilient and proactive “Rice-Hill approach”, supported by President Bush himself, has begun to dominate Washington’s Korea policy-making and previously predominated hawkish wing in the government has become marginalized.¹²

Equally as a result of intensified outside pressure and adaptable tactics, Pyongyang’s altered stance is also increasingly perceived. On the part of North Korea, its return to the six-party mechanism, regardless of its controversial intention and motivations, would be of significance to maintaining the multilateral framework of tackling the nuclear problem in specific and security setting in Northeast Asia as a whole in general. The

⁸ Zhang Liangui, “Stalemate and Solutions: Pyongyang and Washington need to act simultaneously to solve the nuke puzzle, *Beijing Review*, No. 33, September, 2005

⁹ The Six-Party Talks Is Scheduled to Resume After Three-Week Recess, 2005/08/07, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/dslbj/t206655.htm>

¹⁰ Bryan Walsh & Elaine Shannon, “How to keep Talking: Inside the North Korea Talks,” *Time*, Vol.166, No.14, October 3, 2005, p.32

¹¹ “The Fourth round of the Six-Party Talks: Talking points,” *Beijing Review*, No. 33, September 2005

¹² Zhu Feng, “Post-4th Six-Party Talks Korean Nuclear Issue: New Vision and Old Issues,” *Contemporary International Relations*, No.10, 2005.

amplification of this softening posture is dramatically shown in its formal commitment to abandon the existing nuclear weapons and the current nuclear programs; and return to compliance with the NPT and resumed inspections of the IAEA. In view of sharp difference of Pyongyang approach between the previous and the fourth rounds of talks, the commitment as well as possible implementation of it in the future could be regarded as a key sign of seeking a balanced give-and-take solution, despite North Korea's added rhetoric on putting the take (namely, acquire the light-water reactor) prior to the give (give up the nuclear programs) almost immediately after the talks. Pyongyang's easier position seems not only a logic result of enhanced pressure from the other five involved parties and US high-pitched input, but also a sensible choice based on the evolving realities and reasonable assessments. For instance, Seoul's proposed offer to the North of a package scheme of "assistance in exchange for abandonment of nuclear programs" could be quite tempting and it works well in neutralizing Pyongyang's tough agenda focusing on its nuclear aspiration.

China's unique role in brokering an agreement in the fourth round of talks has been widely recognized. Besides several thoughtful arrangements and glaring diplomacy seen in the preceding Beijing negotiations since 2003, a new initiative and the related sideline efforts have been made to develop the common ground. A consistent endeavor has centered on securing a desperate need to narrow the formidable differences between the United States and North Korea by achieving reciprocal and symmetrical concessions. Beijing has unambiguously repeated its rejection of having a cut-off of China's food and energy assistance to Pyongyang as part of decisive pressure-escalating strategy, despite its definite effectiveness. Beijing has also refused Washington's proposal to submit the Korean nuclear issue to UN Security Council, seeing it a counter-productive thrust in terms of a reasonably easier climate necessary for Pyongyang to be willing to work out a meaningful outcome, along with the other five interlocutors. A tough groundwork had to be done in advance, including the shuttle working-level visits to Pyongyang. Among them primarily is the visit of Wang Jiarui, head of the Department of International Relations CPC immediately after North Korea's statement of quitting the six-party format in February 2005. Judged from Chinese diplomatic routines, President Hu Jintao's visit to Pyongyang shortly before the resumption of the six-party talks should be regarded as a clear sign of making North Korea come around rather than an unprepared remedy to save the situation. Before the end of a seemingly arranged formula of two-phased talks, Beijing proposed a subtly worded draft statement with several major rewritings that is based on a roughly balanced consideration of all parties' bottom lined positions. The negotiating delegations could only say yes or no to the final draft and have no right to make any further unilateral corrections, which is believed to positively help remove US doubts to underwrite it.¹³ Beijing's thoughtful design of both the guiding agenda and its details offer a convincing proof of its role of "broker" or "middle man" being preliminarily acceptable so far.

The Stalemate to Be Broken yet: Disputed Points and Uncertainties

While the joint statement itself represents the first significant advance in the six-party negotiations, to release this key document is far from amounting to a guarantee to going toward actual implementations. The next focus of attention is about Pyongyang's right to make civilian use of nuclear energy, and technically how to make it really available for Pyongyang to acquire the light-water reactor with its shutting down the ongoing nuclear facilities. This issue has been so controversial and even difficult that it tends to make the renewed round of talks incapable to go forward, if not fully spoil it. Based on the previous experience of controlling the crises and conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, what are on paper or on lips seem not to be enough to bolster the optimism of a successful settlement of the nuclear development in the region. The argument found so far would prove to be nothing but only creating the likelihood of striding to certain tangible breakthroughs given no credible match of the words with the practice. Equally, the vagueness of several clauses and perhaps deliberated omission of Washington's preoccupied but unconfirmed HEU-based nuclear programs, despite becoming reasonably understandable, also

¹³ Joseph Kahn & David E. Sanger, "US-Korean deal on arms leaves key points open," *New York Times*, 2005/9/20

cast growing doubts on the operational usefulness of the present accord.

To envision the upcoming mission of further negotiations and implementations, there are several points deserving attention. First of all, the reached agreement of principles cannot narrow the huge differences shown by Washington and Pyongyang in dealing with the problem on a specific basis. The two still pole apart. This is clearly reflected in their respective comments after signing the Joint Statement. North Korea and the United States, albeit a common recognition of the necessity of implementing the commitments, stress diametrically divergent aspects: Pyongyang sees an early provision of the light-water reactor to be the key; and Washington regards the fully verifiable renouncement of Pyongyang's nuclear programs as the only way to untie the knot. This tends to be evolving into a chicken-and-egg contention, and therefore make the general accord meaningless.¹⁴

Second, the Joint Statement is the outcome of a series of daunting bargains in the six-party talks. It means that it contains few wishful compromises from Washington and Pyongyang and that the deal itself is nothing more than representing an effort to seek a higher platform to continue interactions among them. This accord helps prevent the multilateral forum from suffering a failure. It is the last-ditch endeavors that make the reached agreement exposed to fragility and vulnerability. Even immediately after signing the document, both Washington and Pyongyang began to highlight their difference of interpreting the major clauses contained in it. Almost nobody doubts that, once discussing the steps to address specific issues in this direction, it might be quite problematic to work out a clear-cut "road map", let alone going toward full implementations.

Third, as one forceful factor supporting the six-party regime, how far the five negotiating partners of North Korea could go in meeting its economic and security needs in return for its dismantlement of the nuclear facilities will still be subject to question. Particularly, the perceived US pragmatism and flexibility have to be confirmed yet. There seems little optimism over any major concessions from the Bush administration on the CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement), HEU-related projects, and even the dubious civilian nuclear utilization. One prefers to see US interest in achieving a vaguely worded deal as passing a hot potato to the future bargains. In addition, the mounting bad-blood and enmity between the United States and North Korea have proved to be highly irritating for the sustainability of the six-party talks, though they are not necessarily relevant to Pyongyang's denuclearization. There are many dimensions to conceive an outbreak. The recent crisis caused by US financial sanctions against North Korea-related entities offers a pointed example.

Fourth, there are still many problems relating to the Korean nuclear issue, directly or indirectly, awaiting an outcome. These factors tend to be interrelated and profoundly affect the security setting of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia at large, among which are Pyongyang's demands for security and benefit guarantees and normalized relationships with Washington and Tokyo; North Korea's ambitious missile programs; Seoul's human rights concerns and Beijing's fear of refugee floods from North Korea. Moreover, the subsequent issue-centered negotiations mean no room for ambiguity of rhetoric and commitment and are expected to submit and practice a clear-cut road-map as well as policy options. This will take the risk of abrupt showdown and unexpected reversal in the following phases as a result of lacking trust and confidence between North Korea and the United States. It also demands the other involved parties to take their respective obligations more unambiguously. Thus the significance of any achieved consensus so far should not be overestimated. And compared by a general agreement on addressing the nuclear crisis on the peninsula, ensuing negotiations and implementations based on a defined "road map" will prove much more difficult and challenging. Even the correlation of interests of all participating parties could, as reasonably believed, become more complicated and more incompatible. Strongly impressed by the "commitment for commitment and action for action" formula, one seems not to expect any

¹⁴ Wei Xian, "The Korean nuclear issue continues to loom large," *Lianhe Zaobao Daily*, 2005/9/22

substantive breakthrough on this front in the foreseeable future.

Of course, the implications of any new developments for the prospects of the Korean denuclearization and Northeast Asian security need specific analysis. A careful decipher of them would be quite important. During the recess of the latest round of Beijing talks, the recently concluded KEDO meeting (Nov. 22, 2005) saw a basic consensus among its member nations that the United States, ROK, Japan and the EU would indefinitely suspend the building of the light-water reactors for North Korea. The timeframe of the KEDO's announcement seems to be delicately arranged in view of the upcoming remaining phase of this round of negotiations that is naturally believed to be ought to yield some palpable results of untying the nuclear knot on the peninsula based on the broadly agreed principles in this regard at the preceding round of the six-party dialogues. One has reasons to associate the KEDO decision with the extraordinarily difficult bargains on the specific basis and even justify the necessity of maximizing pressure on Pyongyang at a current crucial juncture. Interestingly, North Korea has not sensitively responded toward the renewed KEDO approach and shows, at least ostensibly, little surprise at it. In fact, KEDO suspension of manufacture of the light-water reactor for Pyongyang came much earlier (in 2003) at the excuse of North Korea's consistent violations of the Pyongyang-Washington Agreed Framework of 1994 by secretly developing its nuclear weapons. The KEDO decision to end this undertaking seems to timely correspond with Washington's rejection of helping North Korea to build and provide the civilian nuclear reactor aimed to relieve the latter's energy privations (as North Korea has insisted) prior to Pyongyang's implementation of dismantlement of its nuclear facilities at the fourth round of talks in Beijing. It has been noticed that President George W. Bush has repeatedly stressed the necessity of doing so at the late APEC Summit in Busan, namely, a complete abolition of Pyongyang nuclear weapons programs prior to taking account of supply of the light-water reactor (at an appropriate time). However, it is almost certain that both the KEDO move and the sequencing of reciprocal commitments and actions will prove to be more problematic at the next phase of the ongoing round (if it will be there). And whether this stalemate could be terminated will, to great extent, determine the fate of the existing framework built several months ago.

On the other hand, to publicize the end of the project of reactor-building by the KEDO might indicate Washington's interest in addressing the protracted nuclear issue on the basis of the newly emerged reality and its indifference toward tinkering up a fragmented and incomplete Agreed Framework of 1994. Thus the suspension of the reactor-building project should not squarely be beyond imagination and even Pyongyang has become well psychologically prepared for this shift in terms of its actual termination a few years back. By this logic, a new approach marked by ending the supply of the light-water reactor would be not necessarily undercut the negotiations given the ongoing relatively smooth engagements and dialogues between Washington and Pyongyang. As generally suggested, the Korean nuclear crisis has witnessed a dramatic change since its initial appearance some one decade ago, and all the related nations have adjusted and adapted, in varied degree, their respective positions and requirements. It is quite natural to consider that to build the light-water reactor becomes no longer the only solution to the nuclear problem on the peninsula. Some proposed alternatives have begun to show their availability in reducing the crisis, at least partially. For instance, the ROK government newly proposes (July 12, 2005) to provide North Korea with two million kilowatts of electric power through direct transmission to ease its urgent shortage of energy, instead of the much-talked project of offering light-water reactors that would cost nearly five billion USD, among many other related problems. Given certain available alternatives there and the ongoing quarrels between Washington and Pyongyang over the sequencing of implementations, both the feasibility and possibility of a reward-smacking offer of civilian reactors will unavoidable become further constrained.

How Far Can Beijing Go to Broker a Solution?

In the prevailing scenario, Beijing's unique role in dealing with the Korean nuclear issue seems to face some constraints, which could determine, to some extent, both orientations and effects of the six-party dialogues. An objective assessment and expectation of China's potential to influence Pyongyang has become increasingly important. Thanks to various factors, China does play an indispensable role and exert a visible impact on Pyongyang since the very occurrence of the Korean nuclear crisis. As a simple fact, the economic assistance including food and energy from China has been what North Korea desperately needs. Thus naturally, a take-for-granted view believes that Beijing is the key to the nuclear problem. Even there is growing criticism of Beijing's consistent reluctance to pressure Pyongyang by threatening to disrupt the significant assistance in order to renounce its nuclear aspiration. According to a leading Chinese analyst, however, the crux of issue is so much Beijing's ability to decisively pressurize Pyongyang as its unwillingness to serve this effect by making use of economic levers.¹⁵

It is easy to observe that China has its own interest calculus and a broader strategy in preventing the nuclear crisis in Northeast Asia, compared with US strategic goals. In general, China's basic strategic objectives are to ensure a nuclear-free and stabilized Korean Peninsula, meet North Korea's security concern, reinforce its bonds with Seoul, and augment its leverage in this region as a whole. All this demand Beijing to develop a balanced approach toward North Korea: both to achieve the denuclearization peacefully by persuading Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs and secure North Korea's sovereignty by keeping the existing regime in power bolstered by a reform-oriented agenda.¹⁶ Should the collapse of the Pyongyang's regime, caused by either/both outside compulsions or/and internal tensions, China's economic and security interests are believed to be severely jeopardized. As powerfully argued, North Korea has been the only country suffering lack of nuclear security guarantees (either possessing reliable nuclear weapons or being under a nuclear umbrella) in Northeast Asia, which might be regarded as one of basic reasons of the surfacing of the Korean nuclear crisis.¹⁷ Thus China has to highlight the assurance of security for North Korea. And equally important is the fact that Beijing, being well aware of the difference of interests between itself and the United States feels uneasy to follow Washington's diplomacy in the Korean Peninsula. Added to this, uncertain prospects of other thorny problems before both Beijing and Washington, such as the Taiwan issue and the present trouble-laden Sino-Japanese relations as well as their evolving correlations with the crisis prevention in the Korean Peninsula also help explain China's reluctance to force a final but asymmetrical settlement.

Moreover, Beijing's capacity for influencing Pyongyang has been exaggerated by the outside, either inadvertently or intentionally. A close-up observation suggests that China, while boasting some unique advantages to deal with the Northeast Asian neighbor, still finds a limited space for maneuver. Beijing's agenda has to be based on a broader and long-term security interest consideration. For China, apart from the pragmatic issue of refugee flood and collateral problems, the implications of a reunified Korean Peninsula in the future (most possibly, the North incorporated by the South), especially if dominated by US strategy, will be extremely uncertain. Thus, in the case of lack of the expected help from Beijing, Pyongyang's submission to the will of Washington, despite seeming incredible, could be highly threatening as far as China's strategic interests are concerned. Some analyses rightfully suggest that Pyongyang always has some cards to play in its diplomatic encounter with Beijing in terms of the sophisticated geo-strategic and political relevance in Northeast Asia. In the existing circumstances, therefore, North Korea possesses an asset to drive a wedge between the other negotiating partners and play one against another.

¹⁵ Interview with Shi Yinhong, see "The Korean nuclear issue: New developments," *China Daily*, 2005/3/1

¹⁶ Bonnie Glaser, "Inside North Korea: A Joint US-Chinese Dialogue," *USI Peace Briefing*, September 2005, http://www.usip.org/newsmedia/releases/2005/0927_northkorea.html

¹⁷ Shi Yuanhua, "Keeping Six-Party Talks Active Is the Best Way for the Korean Nuclear Issue," *The DPRK-ROK Studies Brief*, No. 2, 2005, p.5

As increasingly recognized, both terms and contents of the Beijing dialogues have to be subject to some alterations, given North Korea's notification of holding nuclear weapons, an unsafe prospect of working out an ultimate solution based on the coordination of divergent interests, and constrained Beijing's role identification. A true or pseudo- reality in North Korea calls for a redefinition of the nature and terms of the denuclearization on the peninsula. Seen across this spectrum, the accord of September 19 should not be overestimated as one encouraging turning point. Quite possibly, the emerging dilemma of a total denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent areas would have to involve some related countries including Japan, apart from Pyongyang being committed to fully liquidate its nuclear development. And North Korea's terms for compensation and bargaining stakes have been raised in the connection. This unexpected shift would make the following rounds of the Beijing talks much more complicated and difficult.¹⁸ Thus, the six-party regime would have to encounter the test of effectiveness of extended functions to deal with the declared Korean nuclear arsenal, if there are no corresponding shifts of strategies and techniques based on a consensus within the multi-national framework.

And despite the merits of the six-party regime shown in the previous Beijing negotiations, an uncompleted and adjustable approach needs to be seriously explored as a result of many new variables emerging since the initiation of the six-party mechanism in August 2003. These changes are marked by the intensifying strategic interactions among the talks-involved players, which have had implications for the significance and effectiveness of the Beijing negotiation itself. The openness of the agenda is expected to show two dimensions: First, more parallel and bilateral dialogues on specific issues within the multilateral framework should be encouraged and promoted in order that the interlocutors can deepen mutual trust and confidence. The tentative practice in this regard has started and proved to be meaningful. This kind of bilateral meetings also help calibrate the strategies and policy options of the dialogists and avoid diverting attention from the core issue during the six-party consultations. Second, an effort needs to be made to explore and test other joint regimes and frameworks, as alternatives, complements and supplements, by the nations concerned in order to serve the same purpose.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, several tentative recommendations can be made to benefit the upcoming practice of the six-party regime of negotiations:

- Fully respect the authority and binding force of the agreed guidelines, and seek fine tuning of interests within the operational framework;
- Institutionalize the six-party regime in a graduated, calibrated and intended way, referring to other comparable regimes of crisis/conflict management;
- Focus on the core issue of denuclearization itself and have other irrelevant issues discussed separately in sub-meetings or by one-to-one dialogues within the six-party framework;
- Develop a balanced and asymmetrical road map based on the principle of unanimity and ensure the interests of all the parties involved as far as the implementation issue is concerned;
- Overhaul the present game code in different ways, discouraging any individual party from dictating the terms, conditions and criteria of the talks;
- Consider the “concurrent, reciprocal, phase by phase” principle (proposed by both China and the ROK) and reciprocal unilateral measures (proposed by the US)¹⁹ despite technical difficulties in order to make “commitment for commitment and action for action” workable,

¹⁸ Zheng Jiyong & Du Yongzhu, “The Korean Nuclear Issue in a Changing Setting: New Developments,” *International Politics Studies*, No.3, 2005, pp.43-44.

¹⁹ Scott Snyder, Ralph A. Cossa, & Brad Glosserman, “Six-Party Talks: Defining A Realistic Roadmap for Success,” *USI Peace Briefing*, Nov. 2005, http://www.usip.org/newsmedia/release/2005/1108_sixparty.html

- Set up the mandated expert team within the six-party regime to regularize working-level consultations, and look into and work on the details of implementing the agreed principles at an early time;
- Jointly explore alternative mechanisms/frameworks as supplements and complements while seeking tangible progress in the existing six-party talks; and
- Do best to avoid a further complexity of the nuclear issues itself as a result of other negative events of mounting hostility and confrontation between the negotiating parties, especially between the United States and North Korea.

Conclusion

With several rounds of path-breaking and intensive negotiations in Beijing, the six-party regime has shown its significance in encountering the Korean nuclear crisis. It could be a significant exploration of preventing crises and conflicts through multilateral endeavors in this volatile region. It is also reasonably seen as a starting point of security cooperation in Northeast Asia at large. All major players involved have their share and stake in it. Given the agreed blueprint in principle drawn up by them in the Joint Statement of September 19, the forthcoming bargains and negotiations on specific issues would be more deterministic for defusing the prolonged tensions on the Peninsula. There are many thorny and tough points over the much-talked nuclear issue to be clarified yet.

In terms of the endurance and intensity of the crisis as well as an uninsured prospect of security in Northeast Asia, multiple means and options should be readily used by the parties concerned to meet these challenges. What must be repeatedly used include patience, persuasion, promise, favor-delivery and mutual compromise rather than coercive undertakings such as threat, provocation, bluff and even use of force. Most probably, balanced, accommodating and peaceful approaches can work properly, despite not necessarily dramatically, instantly and permanently. The Beijing talks since 2003 has tentatively represented this outlook. On the other hand, however, the existing six-party arrangement would find itself increasingly constrained and more issue-centric consultations have to be conducted at a bilateral level among other tough problems. Thus for the time to come, smooth coordination of multi- and bilateral track negotiations would be welcome. While keeping the current six-party channel active and bearing the formidable difficulties in mind, the six negotiating partners need to explore other forms and channels to be its supplements and reinforcements. ■