

Six-Party Talks: The Last Chance for Peace?

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INTRODUCTION

Six-party talks, the first round of which was held in Beijing from August 27 to 29, 2003, may well prove to be the last chance to resolve the standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons program peacefully. They may also turn out to be pivotal in forging a durable peace on the Korean peninsula where, a half century after the armistice, there exists neither a peace treaty nor a reliable mechanism for preventing the recurrence of an armed conflict.

Two recent developments have markedly improved the prospects for convening a second round of the six-party talks. First, on October 25, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry of North Korea announced that Pyongyang would "consider" a proposal for a multilateral security guarantee that U.S. President George W. Bush had unveiled in Bangkok six days earlier. Second, on October 30, both North Korea and China reported that the two countries had agreed "in principle" to continue the six party talks. North Korea stressed, however, that its decision was contingent upon acceptance by the U.S. of "a package solution based on the principle of simultaneous actions."¹⁾

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Since North Korea has a long track record of reversing its decisions and policies, however, no one can be sure whether a second round will actually occur and, if it does, whether or not it will break down. Nor should anyone rule out the possibility of a more positive outcome—that the six-party talks would not only resume, but produce tangible results, such as agreement on a sequence of reciprocal steps leading to the amelioration and, ultimately, the resolution of the standoff. In order to assess the prospects of six-party talks, then, we need to examine the results of the first round. What were the most notable features? What were the gains and losses for the six participating states?

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE AUGUST 2003 CONFERENCE

A major hurdle in attempting to assess the first round of six-party talks is the difficulty of ascertaining precisely what happened. Although it attracted an extraordinary amount of attention from the press, the conference was a closed affair for the most part. Neither the texts nor excerpts of speeches and statements made in its official sessions were published. North Korea, in fact, was the only country that published what it claimed were excerpts of statements made by delegates from some of the participating states.

If this was true of official sessions, the situation with respect to unofficial bilateral contacts, which were an integral part of the Beijing conference, could only be termed as worse. Under these circumstances, journalists covering the unprecedented event had to work feverishly to uncover what was really happening. While the picture painted in the printed media is most probably reliable, one

1) "China, DPRK Agree to Continue Six-party Talks on Korean Nuclear Issues," *People's Daily* (Beijing), October 30, 2003; Joseph Kahn, "North Korea Ready to Resume Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, October 30, 2003; Anthony Faiola, "N. Korea Agrees in Principle to Talks," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2003.

cannot be absolutely certain about some aspects of what transpired.

A key question that remains unanswered, for example, is the following: Did the United States display some flexibility? In some press accounts that appeared after the Beijing talks adjourned, it was suggested that there was a subtle but significant shift in the Bush administration's "stance on providing incentives to North Korea." Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly, the head of the U.S. delegation reportedly indicated to his North Korean counterpart Washington's willingness to "discuss a package of economic and energy aid even before North Korea completely terminates its nuclear programs."²⁾

"U.S. officials," it was reported, "adopted a more moderate and upbeat tone than in previous encounters with the North Koreans." "With the exception of the shift on incentives," however, "the U.S. delegation largely restated long-standing U.S. principles for resolving the crisis. This avoided a fight within the administration on a set of contentious issues, including what incentives to offer and how to structure an intrusive inspection regime in North Korea to verify a deal."³⁾

An unnamed "senior U.S. official" was quoted as having said in the "first detailed U.S. briefing" on the six-nation talks in Beijing: "We made clear that we can sincerely discuss security concerns in the context of nuclear dismantlement and that we are willing to discuss a sequence of denuclearization measures with corresponding measures on the part of both sides." "It would not be correct," he reportedly added, "to say that they would have to do everything before they would hear anything."⁴⁾

The subtle change in Washington's posture, if not policy, however,

2) Glenn Kessler, "U.S. Moderates Position on Incentives for North Korea: Issue of Aid Could Be Discussed Before Arms Programs Ended," *Washington Post*, September 5, 2003, p. A18.

3) *Ibid.*

4) Arshad Mohammed, "U.S. Open to 'Sequence' of Steps with North Korea," *Washington Post*, September 5, 2003.

may have eluded the North Koreans. After Kelly “laid out the American proposal, the North Korean delegation said the United States was seeking to strangle North Korea, and was secretly considering a pre-emptive strike.” Either the “North Koreans had not been listening to Mr. Kelly’s presentation,” as “Russian officials who attended the talks suggested,”⁵⁾ or the head of the North Korean delegation, Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Yong-il, simply stuck to his script, prepared in Pyongyang before the subtle shift in U.S. approach was unveiled in Beijing.

“Selective perception” or “cognitive closure”—the propensity to select messages one either would like or expects to hear, blocking out all other messages—may have been at work. North Korea flatly denied that the U.S. had shown any flexibility at the Beijing talks. According to Pyongyang’s version of what transpired between the North and the U.S. in Beijing, not only did the U.S. adhere to the previously-enunciated position that the North would have to scrap its nuclear weapons program before anything could happen, the U.S. also refused the North’s proposal to exchange verbal commitments first: the U.S. would pledge to abandon its “hostile” policy toward the North and the North would promise to scrap its nuclear weapons program.⁶⁾

The North’s alleged offer to exchange verbal commitments, if it is to be believed, however, must have eluded the U.S. According to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, “the only thing North Korea has said...they would like to see from the United States is a security assurance that we are not planning to attack them or invade them. We have said that and they wish to see this assurance provided in some form that they would have confidence in.”⁷⁾ As will be shown shortly,

5) David E. Sanger, “U.S. Said to Shift Approach in Talks With North Korea,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2003.

6) “Choson oemusong taeyonin 6-ja hoedam e tonun ku otton hungmina kidaedo kajilsu opta” [DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman: We Can Neither Show Any Interest in Nor Expect Any Results From Six-Party Talks], *Korean Central News Agency* (Pyongyang), August 30, 2003, [<http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2003/09/09-01/2003-09-01-001.html>].

however, even if the North's offer had not escaped the U.S.'s attention, it could hardly have elicited a positive response.

As noted, unofficial bilateral contacts were an integral part of the six-party talks. Had it not been for a tacit understanding that they would occur, North Korea might not have agreed to the multilateral forum. The first multilateral talks on the nuclear issue, the three-party talks held in Beijing in April 2003, too, might not have materialized had the North not been assured by China that they would offer opportunities for bilateral contacts between the North and the U.S. The North, in fact, insisted on calling the first Beijing talks not three-party talks but "DPRK-U.S. talks" (*Chomi hoedam*).⁸⁾

Unofficial contacts that occurred between the U.S. and the North Korean delegations during the six-party talks, however, did not appear to have been productive in a substantive sense; they may even have been counter-productive. A 30-minute encounter during a break on the first day of the talks reportedly gave Kim Yong-il an opportunity to make three threats against Kelly: "the Bush administration's hostile policy was compelling North Korea to declare it had nuclear weapons, to show the world that it possessed them by conducting a nuclear test and to show the world that it could deliver those weapons by testing a weapons delivery system such as a missile."⁹⁾

This was not the first time that the North had made such threats to the U.S. and it would not be the last. North Korea's chief delegate to the three-party talks, held in Beijing in April 2003, had made similar threats to his U.S. counterpart, who happened to be Kelly. At that time, however, the North Korean delegate, Li Gun, had included a threat to

7) Arshad Mohammed, "US: N.Korea Must Show Readiness to End Nuclear Plans," *Washington Post*, September 5, 2003.

8) "Choson chungang t'ongsin nonp'yong Beijing Chomi hoedam kyolgwa rul p'yongham"[KCNA Commentary: On the Results of Beijing DPRK-U.S. Talks], *KCNA* (Pyongyang), April 29, 2003.

9) John Pomfret, "North Korea Talks on Nuclear Program Close in Beijing," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2003.

transfer or sell nuclear weapons to third countries.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the August talks, the North would reiterate its claim that it possessed nuclear weapon, asserting in addition, that it had completed the reprocessing of spent fuel rods that had been stored in sealed canisters under IAEA monitoring in Yongbyon until December 2003.¹¹

AN ASSESSMENT

Since the six-nation conference adjourned without setting a date and venue for a second round, it could be adjudged to have failed. The participating countries did agree, however, to allow Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Yi of China, the host country, to issue an oral summary. Wang told a press conference that the six parties had reached a “consensus,” which included the following:

- The nuclear issue should be resolved through peaceful means and dialogue, and stability and peace should be maintained on the Korean Peninsula.
- While a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula should be realized, the security concerns of North Korea should also be taken into consideration.
- While the process of negotiations is under way, all participants should refrain from taking any action that may aggravate the situation.
- In order to resolve the standoff, the parties should take parallel or simultaneous steps.

10) Glenn Kessler, “N. Korea Says It Has Nuclear Arms,” *ibid.*, April 25, 2003; David E. Sanger, “North Korea Says It Now Possesses Nuclear Arsenal,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2003.

11) Paul Eckert, “N. Korea Says Ready to Display ‘Nuclear Deterrent’,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 2003.

- The six-party talks should continue, and the specific date and venue should be decided through diplomatic channels as soon as possible.¹²⁾

Since Wang was presenting his own sense of what the participants had generally agreed, either explicitly or implicitly, however, his summary was subject to varying interpretations. He had, in effect, given to the press what in his view were the lowest common denominators, with the understanding that the absence of any objections from the participating states would constitute a tacit endorsement.

Notwithstanding the above, there was room for skepticism with respect to the extent to which the participants embraced some of the key points in Wang's summary. For example, whether the two pivotal players in the game—North Korea and the U.S.—would adhere to the putatively shared commitment not to take any action that might aggravate the situation was open to question, and subsequent developments showed that initial skepticism had been well grounded.

What needs stressing is that it is not simply the North, but the U.S. as well, that can breach the no-escalation pledge. Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), led by the U.S., held its third meeting in Paris shortly after the six-party talks adjourned and conducted an interdiction training exercise in the Coral Sea, northeast of Australia, in mid-September. Part of the Bush Administration's counter-proliferation strategy, PSI aims "to work with other concerned states to develop new means to disrupt the proliferation trade at sea, in the air, and on land"; eleven countries are participating in the program: Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.¹³⁾ Although the exercise does

12) "DPRK Willing to Give Up Nuclear Plans," *People's Daily* (Beijing), August 29, 2003 [http://english.peoplesdaily.com.cn/200308/29/print20030829_123380].

13) U.S. Department of State, *Proliferation Security Initiative—Paris Meeting of Core Participants, September 3-4, 2003* (Washington: Office of the Spokesman, USDS,

not have a specific target country, U.S. officials acknowledged that “North Korea is a top concern.”¹⁴⁾ North Korea lost no time in denouncing the exercise as a “patent military provocation” that threatens to “put DPRK-U.S. relations within an explosive range.”¹⁵⁾

Another aspect of Wang’s summary that is highly problematic pertains to the principle of simultaneous or parallel actions. While both the U.S. and the North may have endorsed the principle in the abstract, it is plain that what the North means by simultaneous actions is totally unacceptable to the U.S. Reiterating its proposal first unveiled during the three-party talks four months earlier, the North’s chief delegate explained the meaning of simultaneous actions in a keynote speech he gave on the first day of the six-party talks:

First, the U.S. must resume delivery of heavy fuel oil to the North and expand its humanitarian aid of food; in return for this, the North will declare its intention to jettison its nuclear weapons development program.

Second, the U.S. must conclude a nonaggression treaty with the North and provide compensation to the North for the latter’s loss of electricity due to the freeze on, or suspension of construction of graphite-moderated nuclear reactors; in return for this, the North will permit the resumption of a freeze on its nuclear facilities and materials as well as their inspection and monitoring.

Third, diplomatic relations must be established between the U.S. and North Korea and between Japan and the North; in return for this, the North will resolve the missile issue.

Fourth, the U.S. must help complete the light-water reactor (LWR) project; when the project is completed, the North will dismantle its

September 2, 2003), [<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/23673pf.htm>].

14) “Exercise Aims to Stem Atom Proliferation,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2003.

15) “Nodong sinmun Choson sonbak ul tansok, nap’o hanun kongjung mit haesang hullyon ul pinan” [Nodong Sinmun Denounces Air and Sea Exercise Aimed at Interdicting DPRK Ships], *KCNA*, September 13, 2003 [<http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2003/09/09-16/2003-09-16-002.html>].

nuclear facilities.¹⁶⁾

Not only does the foregoing exemplify the North's tactic of "more for less," that is, seeking maximum gains while minimizing costs, but it also displays serious omissions and ambiguity. For it is not clear whether the North intends to dismantle what the U.S. suspects is a program to develop nuclear weapons utilizing highly enriched uranium (HEU).¹⁷⁾ Nor does the North give any inkling as to the eventual fate of nuclear weapons it has already produced, if that is really the case. To the Bush administration nothing short of a complete elimination of the North's nuclear capability—its capacity to make nuclear weapons plus its nuclear arsenal, no matter how small—will be acceptable.

An exchange of verbal commitments that the North claims to have proposed, moreover, is a Trojan horse. What North Korea wants from the U.S. is a pledge to abandon the "hostile" policy toward the North but the yardstick the North says it would use is whether the U.S. is willing to conclude a nonaggression treaty, which the Bush administration has flatly ruled out.

Given all this, how may one assess the gains and losses for the participants in the six-party talks? The biggest winner, arguably, was China. More than anything else, it was China's active intervention and mediation that helped to bring about the unprecedented gathering of representatives from the two Koreas and the four powers that have the

16) "Chomi sai ui haengmunje e kwanhan 6-ja hoedam kaech'oe—Choson ch'uk ilgwai t'agyol tosik kwa tongsi haengdong sunso chesi" [Six-Party Talks on the Nuclear Problem between the DPRK and the U.S. Convene—DPRK Sets Forth a Comprehensive Approach and the Order of Simultaneous Action], *KCNA*, August 29, 2003 [<http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2003/08/08-30/2003-08-30-001.html>].

17) The North actually denies that it has ever acknowledged the existence of an HEU program. "Choson oemusong taeyonin uri ui haek okjeryok kanghwa nun ttaegka toemyon silmullo chungmyong" [DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman: We Will Provide Physical Evidence of Our Strengthened Nuclear Deterrent When the Time Comes], *KCNA*, October 18, 2003 [<http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2003/10/10-20/2003-10-20-001.html>].

highest stakes in the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula. China, by all accounts, did an outstanding job as the host of the talks, taking pains to facilitate unofficial bilateral contacts between North Korea and the U.S. and making extraordinary efforts to forge a consensus among the participants. The talks, in short, showcased the “emergence of China as a more assertive diplomatic power.”¹⁸⁾

Next on the list of “winners” may well be the U.S. In the diplomatic standoff accompanying the nuclear one, it was the North that blinked first, for the latter had to abandon its insistence on bilateral talks with the U.S. A key objective of the Bush administration for the Beijing talks was “to demonstrate to North Korea that the five countries most closely linked to its fate...were united in a determination to bring an end to North Korea’s nuclear threat.” Several senior administration officials reportedly “expressed satisfaction that China, Russia, South Korea and Japan had joined the United States in telling North Korea that it had no rational choice but to drop its confrontational attitude and abandon its nuclear program.” They expressed the hope that “the unified message would register clearly with Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader.”¹⁹⁾

For South Korea, Japan, and Russia, the opportunity to participate in multilateral negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue, from which they had previously been excluded, was most welcome and could even be counted as an accomplishment in its own right. Japan had also hoped to make some headway on the thorny abduction issue, and during three short bilateral contacts on the sidelines of the talks, succeeded in obtaining the North’s commitment to hold further talks on the issue.

It was undoubtedly North Korea that gained the least from the

18) Joseph Kahn, “China at Korea Talks: Taking Diplomacy Upstage,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2003.

19) Peter Slevin and John Pomfret, “N. Korea Threatens Nuclear Arms Test,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2003; Joseph Kahn, “Korea Negotiations End With Agreement to Keep Talking,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2003.

Beijing talks. If it had counted on its only military ally China and its former ally Russia to bolster its position at the talks, it must have been bitterly disappointed. For, apart from underscoring the importance of addressing the North's security concerns, neither China nor Russia expressed unstinting support for the North. It is not surprising, therefore, that the North expressed discontent with the results of the talks. The main source of Pyongyang's disappointment, however, was U.S. behavior. The spokesman for North Korean Foreign Ministry gave the following assessment:

At this conference the United States not only failed to show a willingness to abandon its hostile policy toward the DPRK but actually put forth a brigand's demand that was worse than its erstwhile insistence on our abandoning the nuclear program first. The U.S. asserted that we must take concrete action to destroy our 'nuclear program' in a verifiable and irreversible manner before discussion of our concerns can occur.

During the DPRK-U.S. bilateral contacts that were held while the six-party talks were under way, the U.S. totally rejected our proposal for simultaneous actions aimed at a comprehensive resolution of the problems related to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, arguing instead that even after we have abandoned 'nuclear program,' the missile, conventional forces, human rights, and other issues must be discussed.

This is tantamount to demanding that in a situation where both the DPRK and the U.S. are aiming rifles at each other, we discard our rifle first because the U.S. won't shoot at us. How can we trust the U.S., and discard our rifle? Even children don't play such games. Our position is that both of us should discard our rifles and coexist peacefully.

The talks we had this time were a far cry from what we had expected, producing nothing more than empty rhetoric and becoming instead an arena for disarming us. We no longer have any interest or expectations for such totally useless talks.

Our experience has deepened our conviction that we have no other choice but to continue to strengthen nuclear deterrent capability in order

to safeguard our sovereignty and defend ourselves.²⁰⁾

PROSPECTS

Its disenchantment with the first round of the six-party talks notwithstanding, North Korea, as already noted, has signaled a willingness to participate in the second round. We have also noted that given the North's track record of changing policy, there is no iron-clad guarantee that a second round will actually materialize. Pyongyang's policy reversal, however, can sometimes be constructive. Two examples will suffice: In addition to its reversal of policy with respect to multilateral talks, the North in May 1990 made a stunning about-face on the United Nations membership issue; it abandoned its long-standing opposition to simultaneous membership in the world body with its southern rival, thus paving the way for the two Koreas' joint entry into the UN four months later.²¹⁾ Significantly, in both cases it was China that played a pivotal role in Pyongyang's policy reversal.

China's leverage over the North stems from two basic facts: First, China is North Korea's only military ally, having concluded a "treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance" with the North in 1961. Under the treaty the two parties are obligated to assist each other "with all means at their disposal" in the event of external attack.²²⁾ Second, China is believed to supply up to two-thirds of the fuel and between one-third and one-half of the food the North consumes. To call China North Korea's "lifeline" may not be an overstatement.²³⁾

20) "Choson oemusong taeyonin....," *KCNA*, August 30, 2003. Cited in Note 5.

21) B. C. Koh, "North Korea's Policy toward the United Nations" in Sung Hack Kang (ed.), *The United Nations and Keeping Peace in Northeast Asia* (Seoul: Institute for Peace, Korea University, 1995), pp. 43-72.

22) Byung Chul Koh, *The Foreign Policy of North Korea* (New York: Praeger, 1969), pp. 62-63.

23) China is believed to have supplied 472,000 tons of crude oil to North Korea in 2002; estimates for the three preceding years are as follows: 1999, 317,000 tons;

What is more, China has a huge stake in keeping the Korean peninsula nuclear-free. Should North Korea become a nuclear weapons state, no one can rule out a serious domino effect; Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan may follow suit. This could well be a nightmare scenario for China.

Additionally, China has already invested considerable energy and reputation in the six-party talks, and is eager to see the process continue and ultimately succeed. The visit of a Chinese state delegation led by Wu Bangguo to Pyongyang from October 29 to 31 was emblematic of the high priority Beijing placed on six-party talks. As the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and number two in the Communist Party hierarchy, Wu was in a position to discuss sensitive issues with North Korea's top leadership, including Kim Jong-il. Wu actually became the highest-ranking Chinese leader to visit North Korea in more than two years. The inclusion of Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who headed the Chinese delegation at the August conference in Wu's entourage was a strong signal that the six-party talks would be among the topics that would be discussed, as they indeed were.²⁴⁾

North Korea's announcement on October 25, 2003 that it would consider President Bush's proposal, unveiled in Bangkok six days earlier, for a multilateral security guarantee may, in fact, be related to the Wu visit. For the North, having reached the decision to explore the Bush offer, must have decided to make it public ahead of the Chinese

2000, 389,000 tons, 2001, 579,000 tons. "Chugoku sakunen Kita Chosen ni gen'yu 47 man ton kyokyu, Kankoku shiryō de hanmei" [China Supplied 470,000 Tons of Crude Oil to North Korea Last Year, South Korean Data Reveal], *Asahi Shinbun*, October 9, 2003 [<http://www.asahi.com/special/nuclear/TKY200310090372.html>].

24) Paul Eckert and Teruaki Ueno, "N. Korea Signals Possible Movement on Nuclear Crisis," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2003; Mike Allen, "Top Chinese Official To Visit North Korea," *ibid.*, October 24, 2003; "Wu Bangguo Chugoku kokkai gichō ga chikaku kita Chosen koshiki homon e" [Speaker of Chinese Parliament Wu Bangguo to Make an Official Visit to North Korea Soon], *Yomiuri Shinbun*, October 23, 2003 [<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/news/20031023i403.htm>].

delegation's arrival in Pyongyang. In doing so, the North may hope to obviate the impression that it is acting under Chinese pressure. To probe this development further, we need to examine just what Bush offered, and why.

On October 10, 2003, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell disclosed that "new ideas on security assurance" to offer to North Korea were under consideration. Most important, such assurance would be embodied in "a public written document, preferably signed by some of North Korea's neighbors, but not the formal non-aggression treaty which Pyongyang has demanded in previous talks." China publicly welcomed this development. As a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman put it, "China is happy to see the flexible and positive gesture taken by the United States. We hope that relevant parties can further demonstrate their sincerity and flexibility to help contribute to the continuity of the six-party talks."²⁵⁾

On October 19, Bush held summit meetings first with President Hu Jintao of China and then with President Roh Moo-hyun in Bangkok on the sidelines of the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. It was during these meetings that Bush unveiled what the *New York Times* called "a new, if still vague, American plan...that would provide a five-nation security guarantee to North Korea--but not a formal nonaggression treaty--if the North dismantles all of its nuclear weapons programs."²⁶⁾

Although what Bush made public in Bangkok was not really new, the idea that Powell had first floated now had the *imprimatur* of the President. "The essence of Mr. Bush's message," according to the *New York Times*, "was that he has now agreed, however reluctantly, that the North's security concerns have to be addressed more seriously." A senior administration official said that Bush had made the decision at Camp David only a week earlier. Bush reportedly told Hu that "If

25) "China Welcomes U.S. 'Flexibility' on N.Korea," *Washington Post*, October 14, 2003.

26) David E. Sanger, "Bush Proposes a Security Accord for North Korea," *New York Times*, October 20, 2003.

North Korea agreed to accept such a five-nation agreement,...then it would be under greater pressure not to break that vow, because it would be facing off against China, Russia, Japan and South Korea, in addition to the United States."²⁷⁾

Bush also signaled that he was now personally in charge of America's North Korea policy. In the words of a senior administration official, "the President is involved in all our foreign policy, but North Korea is an area of our foreign policy that is run out of the Oval Office--make no mistake about it...It's an issue on which the President has definite views, and he has directly shepherded the course we are pursuing."²⁸⁾

On October 25, North Korea's state news agency carried a statement from a Foreign Ministry spokesman: "We are ready to consider President Bush's remarks on the written assurances of nonaggression if they are based on the intention to coexist with the North and aimed to play a positive role in realizing the proposal for a package solution." The statement added that Pyongyang's decision is based on the expectation that the U.S. and the North would embrace the principle of simultaneous action, tackling problems one by one, fostering mutual trust, and building a foundation for co-existence. It is noteworthy that the phrase, "the principle of simultaneous action" (*tongsi haengdong wonchik*) was mentioned not once, but three times, which suggests that it is a *sine qua non* for conducting further negotiations with the North.²⁹⁾

How may one explain North Korea's reversal of its policy toward

27) *Ibid.*

28) Maike Allen, "Top Chinese Official To Visit North Korea," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2003, p. A21.

29) Anthony Faiola, "In Shift, N. Korea to Consider Bush's Security Offer," *ibid.*, October 26, 2003; James Brooke and David E. Sanger, "North Korea to 'Consider' U.S. Offer on Security," *New York Times*, October 26, 2003; "Choson oemusong taeyonin 'somyon pulgachim tambo' koryohal yonguiga itta" [DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman: We Are Willing to Consider "Written Assurance of Nonaggression"], *KCNA*, October 25, 2003.

security guarantee? What considerations helped to shape its initial proposal for a nonaggression treaty between Pyongyang and Washington, and what prompted the abrupt change in its policy—although change, as of this writing, pertains only to Pyongyang's professed willingness to "consider" a multilateral security guarantee? Although the North's rhetoric must be taken with a grain of salt most of the time, it does reflect Pyongyang's real thinking from time to time. The reasons the North has given since October 2002 for wanting a bilateral nonaggression treaty with the U.S., in my view, fall into the latter category.

The main reason the North has mentioned is that previous agreements between the North and the U.S. have proved to be useless because the new administration in Washington would not honor them. The North cites as examples the joint statement of June 11, 1993, the Agreed Framework of October 21, 1994, and the joint communique of October 12, 2000. Under these circumstances, the North argues, only treaties that require the approval of the U.S. Congress will be truly binding on the U.S. government and will remain in effect regardless of who is in the White House.³⁰⁾

During the Iraq War, however, the North changed its tune, and asserted that the Bush administration, by attacking Iraq without an explicit endorsement of the U.N. Security Council and in defiance of the U.N. Charter, international law, and world public opinion, had shown that conclusion of a nonaggression treaty with the U.S. would be completely futile. The only reliable deterrent against external attack, Pyongyang argued, would be "awesome military power," notably nuclear deterrent.³¹⁾

30) "Nodong sinmun, kukjebopjok hyoryok ul kajinun Chomi pulgach'im choyak p'iryu" [Nodong Sinmun: DPRK-U.S. Nonaggression Treaty That Is Binding Under International Law Is Needed], *KCNA*, March 5, 2003.

31) "Choson oemusong taeyonin songmyong Choson pando haengmunje rul yuen anbori eso ch'wigup hanun chach'ega chonjaeng chonjugok" [Statement by DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman: To Deal With the Nuclear Problem on the Korean Peninsula in the U.N. Security Council is Tantamount to a Prelude to War], *ibid.*, April 6, 2003 [<http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2003/04/04-07/2003-04-002.html>].

Notwithstanding the preceding logic, however, the North did not drop its demand for a nonaggression treaty with the U.S. until October 25, 2003, when its foreign ministry spokesman, as noted, indicated Pyongyang's willingness to consider the U.S. proposal for a multilateral security guarantee in a non-treaty format. How may one account for this development? Simply put, the North appears to have made a pragmatic adjustment in its policy and tactics.

Since it has become clear that chances of getting what it wants are exceedingly low, perhaps zero, the North may have decided to go for the next best thing. A multilateral security guarantee that is not embodied in a treaty, the North may reason, is better than no guarantee. What is more, there is a possibility that such a guarantee may even turn out to be superior to a bilateral one. For the U.S. pledge not to attack the North will be a solemn commitment not only to North Korea but to the other parties as well. This may lower the likelihood of a breach, and in the event that a breach does occur, the North will have a stronger case in its quest for help from its ally, China, and former ally, Russia.

Additionally, the collateral benefits of a multilateral security guarantee cannot be overlooked. For it is certain to be part of a package deal or a precondition for such deal, which will include the resumption of heavy fuel oil delivery, expanded food assistance, and normalization of relations with the U.S. and even Japan.

Finally, the influence of China cannot be over-emphasized. North Korea is in no position to alienate, much less antagonize, China, which a stubborn refusal to heed Beijing's advice has the potential to make happen.

CONCLUSION: A POSSIBLE SCENARIO

Assuming that the second round of the six-party talks will materialize in the coming months, if not weeks, what can one reasonably expect to occur? Although it has a good chance of

becoming more productive than the first round, the complexity of the problem, coupled with the depth of mutual distrust between North Korea and the U.S., ensures that finding a common ground and reaching an agreement will not be easy. Nonetheless, unless some progress is made in the second round, the process may enter into an impasse or even fall apart altogether.

One can visualize a sequence of simultaneous or collateral actions, which may require considerable time to agree on and, more important, implement. The scenario I envision is as follows:

The very first step can or perhaps needs to be an exchange of verbal commitments. North Korea will pledge not only to the U.S., but also to the other four participants in the six-party talks that it would dismantle its nuclear weapons programs completely, verifiably, and irreversibly. The U.S. and the other four states would pledge to provide the North with a document, be it a joint declaration or an agreement, which will guarantee that the U.S. shall refrain from attacking North Korea in exchange for the latter's dismantlement of its nuclear weapons program.

The next stage will witness concrete action on the part of both North Korea and the U.S. North Korea will return to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), re-freeze its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, and permit the stationing on a rotating basis of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) anew. The U.S., for its part, will resume delivery of heavy fuel oil through the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), provide an expanded food assistance through the World Food Program (WFP), and either resume the LWR project through KEDO or renegotiate the Agreed Framework—or replace it with another agreement in which an alternative to the LWR project is spelled out. This will be a most difficult stage, and may require prolonged negotiations even to agree on, let alone to implement.

Even more difficult is the third stage, during which North Korea will be required to dismantle, under international supervision, its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and elsewhere. All three graphite-

moderated reactors, including the two under construction in Yongbyon (50MW) and Taechon (200MW), respectively, will have to be destroyed, along with the reprocessing facility and the fuel rod factory. The North will also have to dismantle its HEU-based nuclear weapons program.

The U.S. and the other four states will provide the multilateral security guarantee that was promised in the first stage. It will be signed by heads of state or government of all the five countries. The U.S. will also lift all economic sanctions on North Korea, remove the North from the list of terrorism-sponsoring states, and facilitate Pyongyang's entry into the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Asia Development Bank. This will open the way for the North to apply for long-term, low-interest (or interest-free) loans from international financial institutions, particularly, the International Development Association.

In the next stage, North Korea will be asked to do what it may fiercely resist doing, namely, destroying its nuclear arsenal. This must also be done under international supervision. In addition, North Korea will be asked to stop testing, producing, and exporting missiles, missile technology and parts; North Korea will, in effect, be asked to join the Missile Technology Control Regime. The North and the U.S. will exchange liaison offices, which they will upgrade to embassies as soon as possible. The U.S. will provide more food assistance and economic assistance to the North in order to compensate for the latter's loss of hard currency income from missile export.

Since North Korea wants to establish diplomatic relations with Japan as well, the stalled negotiations on diplomatic normalization may resume, provided that the North meets Japan's preconditions. These will include the reunion of the children and spouses of Japanese kidnap victims in the North with their respective parents and spouses who returned to Japan in October 2002 and clarification by the North Korean government of the circumstances under which eight or more Japanese kidnap victims lost their lives in the North. Meeting these conditions will not be easy for the North, but the rewards will be

immense, of which sizable compensation for Japanese colonial rule will be the centerpiece. Packaged as “economic cooperation,” it may total or even surpass 10 billion dollars, which will be spread over a decade or so. If realized, this will be the largest infusion of aid to the North in decades, and will go a long way toward resuscitating its economy, which has been on life support since the mid-1990s.

In addition to the foregoing, a comprehensive solution of the North Korean nuclear problem will most probably necessitate the tackling of other thorny issues—notably, conventional forces, refugees, human rights, and economic reform and opening.³²⁾ Whether all this can be done is problematic. What seems reasonably certain, however, is that six-party talks offer the last—and perhaps the best—chance for finding a peaceful solution to the nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula.

32) See, for example, Michael O’Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal With a Nuclear North Korea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), a Brookings Institution book.