

Background and Prospects for North Korea's Return to the Six-Party Talks

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On 'the last day of October,' the good news that North Korea will return to the six-party talks came from Beijing, China. For South Korea, the state of affairs is not completely satisfactory in that the news is the result of China's mediation and not that of South Korea. But considering the international nature of the North Korean nuclear issue, it is time to put aside those disappointments and welcome the breakthrough and hope for success in the six-party talks.

Some experts groups have already put forward the prospect since North Korea's nuclear test on October 9, that the test was a crisis in the Korean peninsula but also an opportunity for a new breakthrough.

Therefore, the announcement of North Korea's return to the six-party talks through the recent trilateral meeting was not completely unexpected. North Korea has frequently utilized the tactic where it would intensify the crisis to the limit and then attempt to reach a compromise. In other words, it has favored a hit-and-clinch strategy.

The following is an analysis of why North Korea agreed to return to the six-party talks under the current situation, where the Bush administration is being criticized by the Democratic party that its North Korean nuclear policy has failed, and that the Democrats are expected to win the mid-term elections.

First, North Korea seems to have assessed that some internal objectives have been reached. By conducting the nuclear test, Kim Jong Il has proved himself to be a 'manly' leader, and has strengthened his prestige through various mass rallies. Propaganda attributing its economic hardships to US's economic sanctions has been somewhat successful, and the once loosening social cohesion has been recovered. Also, the hard-liners against the US, who are mostly from the third and fourth generation, have strengthened their positions. But on the other hand, the North Korean regime seems to have concluded that its citizens will not be able to endure the economic difficulties resulting from the current economic sanctions like they have in 1995-97, when they had trudged through the 'march of tribulation.' This is because at that time, South Korea, the US, and many other nations and NGOs have actively provided food aid to North Korea, but now these nations and organizations have chosen the opposite. In addition, the citizens of North Korea are tasting

‘the benefits of commerce’ and ‘money,’ and therefore will not be as willing to go through a ‘second march of tribulation.’

Second, North Korea seems to have realized that the international environment is not in its favor. On October 14, the 15 countries of the UN Security Council voted unanimously to sanction North Korea, and even Russia and China, its traditional allies, have joined in. Then, the international community started to consistently call for the economic sanctions of North Korea, including US’s steps to carry out PSI. The political risk is too great for North Korea to control these circumstances with a second nuclear test. Therefore there is a need to turn the situation around before the sanctions by the international community become stricter. It is possible, of course, that North Korea feels more confident in returning to the six-party talks now that it has acquired the status of nuclear nation regardless of the recognition of the US. North Korea may also have felt that it would be difficult to keep on ignoring the pressure from South Korea, China, and Russia to return to the six-party talks. The reality is that North Korea is too economically dependent on China to disregard China’s mediation, which acts as North Korea’s lifeline. But the most important factor may be that the US has promised North Korea ‘bilateral talks and negotiations on lifting financial sanctions within the six-party talks framework.’ On November 1, the North Korean Foreign Ministry announced through a question-and-answer session between the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry and a reporter from the KCNA that “we will return to the talks under the condition that the issue of lifting financial sanctions will be discussed and resolved between North Korea and the US within the six-party talks framework.” The underlying intention may be that it will try to gain as many concessions from the Bush administration by giving it some breathing space before the US mid-term elections.

Third, North Korea may have come to the conclusion that it should not push South Korea into a corner, for the sake of ‘cooperation between the two nations’ and practical reasons. Currently, South Korea’s sunshine policy is in a precarious situation not only because of the North’s nuclear test but also the recent ‘spy incident,’ and these developments could revert inter-Korean relations back to the pre-6 · 15 joint declaration era. These changes could severely affect North Korea’s ‘unification front.’ Also, the fact that South Korea has suspended providing food and fertilizer aid after the North’s missile launches on July 5 could exacerbate food shortages in the coming winter, thereby raising the possibility of heightened discontent among its citizens. It is true that since 2000 the North Korean economy was on the path to recovery, and that South Korea’s assistance played a vital role. In such a situation, a halt in food aid from the South is a grave issue that could cause political discontent among North Koreans.

Then what will become of the six-party talks? In order to assess whether the talks are a success, it is important to identify the US’s position. The Bush administration has consistently asserted that ‘changing the Kim Jong Il regime’ was a prerequisite in resolving the North Korean nuclear standoff. The economic sanctions are a means to induce an implosion. North Korea responded in return by bringing out the nuclear test card. Therefore, resolving the North Korean nuclear issue would be nearly impossible without the Bush administration providing the Kim Jong Il regime security guarantees.

Obviously, North Korea will try to negotiate the US' economic sanctions through the six-party talks, and to link the results of the US's recognition of the Kim Jong Il regime. It is also possible that North Korea will push forward harder by claiming its status as a nuclear nation in order to extract more concessions from the US.

But there is no evidence that president Bush has changed his attitude towards Kim Jong Il. His hard-line stance has actually strengthened, saying that without the dismantling of nuclear weapons the economic sanctions will continue during the six-party talks. At the same time, one also hears that "all options are still on the table for Bush" from the administration.

Therefore, even if the US lifts some of the sanctions on the BDA through the six-party talks, unless the fundamental positions of the two nations are resolved or relaxed, the talks will continue to be ineffective.

The Bush administration will try to profit from the North's return to the six-party talks for its mid-term elections on November 7, and if North Korea decides to leave the talks because of the US's hard-line stance, the US can enforce harder sanctions through the UN Security Council and blame North Korea. Either way, the US has nothing to lose.

For South Korea, which has to maintain its relationship with both 'its allies' and 'its people,' it has no choice but to wish for a dramatic compromise between North Korea and the US, and a subsequent success of the six-party talks. But it is also important for South Korea to behave and voice its opinions more actively. If the six-party talks fail to produce a compromise, then the situation on the Korean peninsula will become even more dire, and may lead to the unthinkable, worst-case scenario.