

The End of the Second Phase of the Fifth Round of the Six-Party Talks and 2007

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The second phase of the fifth round of the six-party talks, which had begun on December 18 in Beijing, ended with a statement by the chairperson of the talks on December 22. From the outset, there were no expectations that the enormous challenges concerning immediate dismantlement of North Korean nuclear programs and recognition of the regime would be resolved all at once. After North Korea's nuclear tests on October 9, there was an extreme tension on the Korean peninsula with fear over a possible war, and the general atmosphere was that it was huge relief just to bring the United States and North Korea together at the negotiating table. Thus, not breaking up the six-party talks framework and maintaining its momentum in and of itself would be a positive result.

North Korea and the US, the two major participants of the negotiations, held direct talks on December 19 and 20 on the BDA transactions, discussing a possible compromise on the issue. But an immediate solution could not be reached, and the two sides were only able to reconfirm their basic positions. The meeting concerning the BDA ended with an agreement to continue talks in New York in early 2007. The specifics of the meeting are unknown, but apparently the issues discussed include unfreezing legal funds by the US, and the North's pledge to prevent similar cases from happening again, along with punishment of the guilty. At the main meetings of the six-party talks, it seems that the US had handed an 'amended proposal' to North Korea, which includes 'early stage execution measures' for North Korean nuclear dismantlement, and specific corresponding measures as well. The contents include a four-step process for the dismantlement of North Korean nuclear weapons program, that is 'freezing-notification-verification-dismantlement,' and the corresponding responsive measures by the five other participating nations. The US proposals are ① to provide security guarantees to North Korea, such as a written regime security guarantee or signing a treaty that ends hostilities at the freezing phase (stopping operations of the nuclear facilities such as the 5MW nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, allowing IAEA inspectors to the facilities,

notifying its nuclear programs, closing down its nuclear test sites, etc.), and ② to provide economic and humanitarian aid at the notification phase.

The US is in a position to discuss economic or humanitarian aid during the freezing phase, but is known to have proposed to discuss the matter through a working group planned to be formed in the future. The US has also apparently proposed to discuss the energy support issue through the working group as well. In response to these, North Korea is said to have been adamant about its 'lifting sanctions first principle,' but at the same time, rather open to certain issues such as halting operations of its Yongbyon nuclear reactor and allowing inspections teams into the country.

As is well known, the fundamental reason why the six-party talks, held after numerous difficulties, have failed to find a resolution is the deep mistrust between the United States and North Korea. North Korea believes that the US would utilize not just the nuclear weapons program but also various other issues such as human rights, drugs, money counterfeiting, biochemical weapons, democracy, and the market economy in the negotiations, so the North will try to gain acceptance of its regime's legitimacy by using the nuclear weapons program as the 'line of last resort.' Meantime, the US believes that North Korea is an 'evil' and must disappear off the face of the earth, and asserts that the North's promises absolutely cannot be trusted until one can affirm the dismantlement of its nuclear weapons with one's own eyes.

Despite these difficulties, the six-party talks may produce some positive results in 2007. This is because the year 2007 has special significance. First, there are many significant 'turning-point' North Korean anniversaries, including the 95th birthday of Kim Il Sung, the 65th birthday of Kim Jong Il, the 15th anniversary of the ascension of Kim Jong Il as the head of state, the 10th anniversary of him taking office as General Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, and the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the Korean People's Army. It is customary that these 'turning-point' years are celebrated with pomp and circumstance. Therefore, it is highly likely that 2007 will be a year where the 'Kim Il Sung equals Kim Jong Il' logic will be strengthened and Kim expands his administration.

In order to achieve these goals, Kim Jong Il must provide tangible results, and for the people of North Korea the most pressing matters would be security and the economy. Security must be acquired through the US, and economic gains must be acquired from other neighboring countries such as China, South Korea, and Japan. Naturally, achieving these goals requires improving relations with the US, and in its center lies the North's nuclear weapons. If North Korea is not willing

to change a course on this issue, the US will never guarantee security for Kim Jong Il and the North Korean regime.

Under these circumstances, the path that Kim Jong Il can take is to allow IAEA inspections teams inside North Korea, freeze the 5MW reactor, re-sign the NPT, and in return receive large-scale economic aid from the US and neighboring countries. One could label this as a 'Kim Jong Il-style pragmatism.' Kim Jong Il already has experience in actively improving relations with the EU in 1998 after launching Taepodong 1 missile. Therefore, North Korea might actively try to open up to the world with the momentum it has gained after its nuclear weapons test. If this proves to be true, then the six-party talks may show some results.

Currently, the relationship between the two Koreas is stalled due to the suspension of aid in food and fertilizers after North Korean missile launches in July. But if North Korea decides to designate 2007 as 'the dawn of the year of building a powerful nation,' then improving inter-Korean relations is necessary. Of course, the North accuses the South of being a 'puppet of the American imperial forces' and 'smaller than a fistful,' it is clear that South Korea is neither a lackey of America nor a fistful of sand. It has the eleventh-largest economy, as well as the eighth-largest military in the world. Without the South, North Korea will not be able to pursue any course of action.

For these reasons, it is expected that North Korea will pursue an active South Korean policy in early 2007 under the flag of 'the cooperation of the Korean people.' If relations between North Korea and the US improve, the North could instead choose to exclude the South to communicate with the US. But even if the gap between North Korea and the US does narrow, it will be difficult to ignore South Korea, its real provider of economic aid.

There is not a broad range of choices for South Korea in 2007 due to its upcoming presidential election. But if North Korea is sincere about dealing with 'the cooperation of the Korean people,' then a second inter-Korean summit meeting would be possible. But a summit meeting would have meaning only if it contains substance, not just formalities, and its agenda must be something that contributes to building trust in the military field between the two Koreas within the broader framework of building a peace regime in the Korean peninsula, such as establishing a hotline between President Roh Moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il or exchange of military personnel. Obviously, the South Korean government will gain support of its people only when the summit meeting is conducted in a transparent and open manner.

South Korea believes that, because of the presidential elections in 2007, stability on the Korean peninsula is paramount, and the US also needs a diplomatic achievement for the Bush administration

at this point in time. To meet these expectations, South Korea must resume aid to the North at the appropriate moment, and revive as well. The US also must change its course on North Korea to prevent proliferation of the nuclear weapons. The US does not have a wide range of choices either, considering the fact that it cannot, in reality, launch an armed attack toward North Korea. If it is impossible to eliminate nuclear weapons, as in the case of India and Pakistan, the US has to turn North Korea into a 'pro-American' nation.

In conclusion, 2007 will be a very important year for South Korea. If North Korea decides that 2007 will be the year it will intervene in South Korea's presidential elections, and the year that it waits for the Bush administration to be replaced, then a great disaster will occur. On the contrary, if the North decides that 2007 will be the year for a compromise between North Korea and the US, and for a great leap forward for the two Koreas, then 2007 will be an opportunity to realize its goal of 'the dawn of a powerful nation.' At the same time, if the US transforms into a country that wields soft power in a more inclusive way, then more nations of the world will follow. Also, if South Korea adopts a more flexible North Korean policy, then inter-Korean relations will be more harmonious. In response to these, although North Korea will not immediately give up its nuclear weapons, it eventually participate in the long journey towards nuclear dismantlement under the principle of 'action versus action.' But if this optimistic scenario is not realized, then the six-party talks will be of no avail, and a second 'June 1994' might occur.