

Hexagonal Headache

By John Feffer | September 4, 2003

It is a testament to the absurdly low expectations attached to the diplomatic abilities of both North Korea and the United States that pundits have avoided the obvious conclusion concerning the recently concluded Six-Party Talks in Beijing.

They were a disaster.

Here's the rub, though: the hardliners in Washington got exactly what they wanted and may get hoisted by their own hubris as a result.

The two indicators frequently cited as evidence that the talks went smoothly are: none of the six delegations stormed out of the meeting hall and all sides agreed to meet again within two months. For a brief moment the day after the delegates went home, North Korea told the truth about the talks—that they were a failed effort and probably a waste of time—before returning to a more open-ended pledge to continue participating. Without any sign of compromise from Washington, though, North Korea is pushing forward with its nuclear program along with the threat to test a nuclear weapon.

Hardliners such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the State Department's John Bolton are probably greeting this result with little jigs of exultation. Pyongyang couldn't have followed their script any better. Its skepticism concerning future talks has made North Korea look militantly ham-fisted. Russia and China are ever more frustrated with their erstwhile ally. And a nuclear test, should North Korea be so technologically equipped or politically stupid to hold one, would be the checkered flag to signal the final lap toward regime change.

The hardliners in Washington have made no secret of their distaste for negotiations with North Korea and so contrived to ensure that the Six Party talks would fail. For instance, they made sure that the talks would not involve any negotiations. Negotiations require give and take, and despite rumors floated in the press about potential flexibility on a non-aggression pact or a package of economic incentives, there was no wiggle room in the U.S. position in Beijing.

This uncompromising stance is all the more remarkable given that both sides are talking about roughly the same elements of a deal—ending North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for various economic, political, and security guarantees. The chief disagreement, at least on the surface, concerns sequence. In other words, should North Korea freeze its program first or should the United States offer security guarantees first? That the two sides couldn't begin to address the issue of sequence in Beijing suggests that the talking cure is not fully subscribed to by either side.

The Six Party Talks were flawed as well because the particular multilateral format only encouraged North Korea's infamous "cornered badger" behavior. Outnumbered five to one over the validity of its nuclear program, North Korea couldn't effectively marshal what remains of comradely feeling in China and Russia. Nor could it exploit the obvious fact that the United States can only count on limited support from one country in the region (Japan) for a more aggressive solution to the stand-off. The informal discussions, particularly between the U.S. and North Korea, were scant. The formality of the presentations precluded much in the way of creative thinking (for example, a joint economic deal from Russia and South Korea) or creative pressure (on either North Korea or the United States to be more flexible).

China's role as convener of the talks was, of course, a plus. However, it has come up against a stubborn law of diplomacy: you can bring six parties to the table, but you can't force them to compromise. This was the primary flaw of the meeting. Hardliners on both sides have been, at some level, happy to pursue "talks without negotiations." North Korea wants more time to develop its nuclear program. The United States wants more time to see if the govern-



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

ment in Pyongyang will collapse. To move from talks to negotiations, both sides will have to be pressured into more flexible positions.

North Korea's reputation in the world these days is not exactly sterling. The Bush administration wanted, through the Six Party Talks, to isolate the country further by demonstrating that it can't play well with five others. To do so, however, the U.S. delegation had to act just as uncompromisingly. This lack of diplomacy prompted China to declare after the talks that U.S. policy was a "main problem," a sign that the hardliners in Washington may well have overreached themselves. If another round of talks do take place within the next two months, the hardliners might not be able to pull off a repeat performance.

The flaws in the structure and outcome of the Six Party Talks should not lead to the conclusion that

engagement and diplomacy are failed options. Neither side has yet pursued engagement, not since relations took a turn for the worse when George W. Bush assumed office. Rather, responsibility for the hexagonal headache in Beijing should be attributed to the failures of non-engagement. Diplomacy is still the best method of resolving the current crisis. We just haven't seen any of it yet.

(John Feffer <johnfeffer@aol.com>, editor of Power Trip: U.S. Unilateralism and Global Strategy after September 11 (Seven Stories Press), writes regularly for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He is the author of the forthcoming North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis (Seven Stories Press).)

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

John Feffer, "Hexagonal Headache," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 4, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0309nk.html>

Production Information:

Writer: John Feffer

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

