

North Korea Returns to the Negotiating Table

By John Feffer | November 1, 2006

North Korea's decision to return to the negotiating table is a win-win-win situation, at least temporarily. The United States, China, and even North Korea gain from the announcement. However, the boost given to each country—a modest “October surprise” for the Bush administration, a diplomatic achievement for China, and a stronger negotiating position for North Korea—will not carry over into the negotiations themselves. A decision to talk, after all, does not translate automatically into a decision to compromise.

The resumption of the Six-Party Talks is a small but much-needed bright spot in the otherwise dismal foreign policy record of the Bush administration. In May 2003, 67% of Americans were satisfied with America's place in the world, according to a Gallup poll. But a just-released Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) poll shows a complete reversal in attitudes. Now, 68% of Americans are *dissatisfied* with America's global position. Foreign policy is a huge albatross around the neck of the administration, and numerous Republican Party candidates in the upcoming midterm elections are trying to distance themselves from their leadership's policies.

On North Korea, according to the PIPA poll, 55% of Americans believe that the United States should talk to North Korea without preconditions. This percentage barely changed as a result of the October nuclear test. After all, North Korea's test simply confirmed that the Bush administration policy was just not working. The restarting of the Six-Party Talks has come just in time to salvage some small diplomatic victory for the administration.

But with October marking one of the highest death tolls for U.S. soldiers in Iraq since the 2003 invasion, with the Taliban gaining power again in Afghanistan, and with numerous domestic scandals, this small success in East Asia will not likely affect the mid-term elections.

China probably gains more than the United States has from this development. After the nuclear test, Washington pundits predicted a major setback for Beijing's “soft power” approach to multilateralism. China was instrumental in convening the Six-Party Talks and mediating

between the United States and North Korea. With its nuclear test, North Korea not only defied China's explicit warnings, it jeopardized Beijing's whole economic project of turning its northeastern provinces—along with North Korea's Rajin port—into an economic hub. Short of outright war, there's nothing worse than sanctions to put a damper on regional investment. Brokering the recent seven-hour discussions between U.S. and North Korean diplomats, China has again proven that it holds the key to Northeast Asia's future.

Finally, North Korea itself is a winner. Pyongyang didn't achieve the bilateral negotiations it's been clamoring for with the United States, but no doubt some face-to-face meetings will take place on the outskirts of the multilateral negotiations. More importantly, North Korea has a stronger bargaining position at the table. It has more of a nuclear program (though how much more remains uncertain) and will likely ask for more in return.

Whether South Korea gains anything from the return to the talks remains to be seen. Getting back to the table has required the expenditure of much diplomacy and no small amount of arm-twisting. The prospect of a Chinese energy cutoff and the impact of the various sanctions certainly pushed North Korea to the table without achieving its coveted bilateral talks. And the prospect of an end to the non-proliferation regime has certainly pushed the United States toward some small measure of compromise.

But the Six-Party Talks still suffer from the same two problems. North Korea can't have a nuclear deterrent and trade it away at the same time. And the United States can't



both negotiate a regime-saving agreement with North Korea and push for regime collapse at the same time.

In 1994, when the two sides faced the same two competing paradoxes, a face-saving compromise was achieved. North Korea traded away its nuclear program but probably kept an insurance policy, namely some processed plutonium. The Clinton administration signed the Agreed Framework but sold it to Congress by reassuring American politicians that the regime in Pyongyang wouldn't be around in 2003 when the light-water reactors were due to go on-line.

Today, North Korea is further along with its nuclear program and the Bush administration is more unyielding in its attitude toward "evil" regimes. However, this time around, China is more actively involved in mediating the crisis, and South Korea has more to offer if a settlement is within reach.

Still, the current Six-Party Talks will only succeed if both Pyongyang and Washington come to an arrangement that is as flexible as the Agreed Framework. The Bush administration must finally accept the possibility of negotiating an agreement. Pyongyang must be willing to give up its nuclear program. Both sides will no doubt harbor their secrets—perhaps a cache of processed plutonium on the one hand and a persistent desire for regime collapse on the other. Without resolving these central contradictions, however, the Six-Party Talks will go in precisely the same direction as before: nowhere.

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