

## SIX-PARTY TALKS: “THE OTHER FOUR”

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### I. THE ROLE OF “THE OTHER FOUR” PARTIES

Experts in 2006 were divided about the efficacy of the Six-Party Talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. Some dismissed the Six-Party Talks as unnecessary and even counterproductive. They argued that Pyongyang had repeatedly expressed its willingness to negotiate its nuclear weapons program away in exchange for regime security and that only the U.S. could offer such an assurance. Adding more participants to the talks, they said, only complicated matters and impeded progress, since each country sought to maximize its interests while minimizing its costs.

Others argued that the Six-Party Talks were the key to dealing with North Korea. Of course, none of the six parties wished to be excluded from the talks—Japan and Russia remembered their exclusion from the Four-Party Talks of the late 1990s—but otherwise their reasons for supporting the talks differed significantly:

1. North Korea preferred that there be no multilateral talks at all on its nuclear program—its position was that the nuclear issue was a bilateral matter between it and the U.S.—but it did not want the other five to meet together without it.
2. The U.S. originally rejected all bilateral talks with the DPRK for ideological reasons—the Bush administration said it did not “negotiate” with evil—but later found that its only practical means of dealing with North Korea was diplomacy. Thus, it opted for multilateral diplomacy.

3. China wanted to prevent any unilateral U.S. action against North Korea, which might destabilize the Korean Peninsula and China’s border area with it. Also, in general, if any more countries than the DPRK, U.S., and the ROK were to be involved in Korean Peninsula talks, it wanted to be included.
4. Prime Minister Koizumi wanted to show Japanese voters that he was using the Six-Party Talks to press North Korea to resolve the issue of North Korea’s abductions of Japanese citizens in the 1970s, a major domestic political concern. Koizumi also wanted to enhance U.S.-Japanese security cooperation by working together on North Korea.
5. President Putin saw the Six-Party Talks as another opportunity to play in a complex strategic game among the U.S., China, and Japan, and possibly as a means of commercial gain.
6. South Korea believed that bilateral U.S.-North Korean talks were the critical element in resolving the nuclear issue and its underlying cause but felt that the other parties must press the U.S. and the DPRK to compromise with each other. On broader Korean Peninsula issues, South Korea believed that it and North Korea should be the primary if not exclusive interlocutors.

Finally, some argued that, while resolution of the nuclear issue would depend mostly on the U.S. and North Korea, the other parties had useful roles to play. As the South Korean government believed, the other four could put pressure on both the U.S. and the DPRK to compromise. Together, the four parties could also guarantee any agreements that were reached primarily between the U.S. and the DPRK. South Korea and Japan in particular were willing in principle to give North Korea massive material incentives as part of a resolution of the nuclear and related issues. China and Russia could assure North Korea that they would use their UN Security Council membership to prevent the U.S. from mobilizing the international community against it.

To judge the potential usefulness of the Six-Party Talks, this chapter examines the interests and perspective of the “other four” participants in the Six-Party Talks: China, Japan, Russia, and the ROK.

## II. THE OTHER FOUR

### 1. CHINA

China was certainly one of the biggest variables in the ultimate success or failure of the Six-Party talks. As a fellow communist country and North Korea's most important ally, the PRC had provided most of the DPRK's external economic and political support in recent decades, including food and oil. China's motivations in the Six-Party Talks were complex.

China wanted a stable, peaceful neighborhood, at least during its current process of modernization; it saw stability in the Northeast Asian region as vital for its economic growth and thus domestic political stability. China feared that Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, if unchecked, might eventually lead to a major military crisis on the Korean Peninsula involving the U.S. The PRC was also concerned that tensions over North Korea might encourage closer strategic and military cooperation between the U.S. and Japan, including the development of theater missile defenses (TMD). (The U.S. and Japan did indeed accelerate and intensify TMD cooperation in 2006 in response to Pyongyang's long-range missile tests.) Indirectly, China used its assistance to the U.S. in dealing with Pyongyang as a strategic card against the Washington-Tokyo alliance and Washington's support for Taiwan.

Fundamentally, China preferred that the North Korean regime be sustained and that there be a balance between the North and the South. The PRC naturally feared that the collapse of North Korea might result in an extension of superior American power in the region; it was also concerned about the risk that North Korean refugees might flee *en masse* into China in case of instability in North Korea. On the other hand, China did not wish to help North Korea to the extent of sacrificing its own international credibility.

From China's point of view, a breakthrough in South-North Korean relations must be consistent with its own interests. China believed that an improved relationship between the two Koreas could help not only to prevent the collapse of the North Korean regime but also to obviate its supplying massive humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people. China perceived that the end of the North Korean threat might result in South Koreans concluding that U.S. forces were no longer needed on the Korean Peninsula.

From an economic point of view, Beijing sought increased trade with South Korea to facilitate its economic development and to benefit from major

technological transfers, which were critical to China's long-term prosperity. China was unlikely to tolerate reckless behavior on the part of Pyongyang that might jeopardize its fruitful partnership with Seoul. China was concerned about any increase in tensions on the Korean Peninsula that might hurt South Korea's economic health, which was important to China's own economic stability.

During the past decade, the PRC's political influence within the region grew apace with its economic development. In the short-to medium-term, China would benefit the most, in diplomatic terms, from a radically improved relationship between the two Koreas. The PRC's intensive efforts in the Six-Party Talks stemmed in part from its belief that a resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue would enhance its own status in the region.

The PRC thus played the role not only of host of the Six-Party Talks but also of mediator between North Korea and the U.S. Its efforts were key to persuading North Korea to agree to the convening of Six-Party Talks in August 2003. Thereafter, too, the PRC intervened whenever the talks stalled. Beijing's efforts frequently included the dispatch of senior officials to Pyongyang to press top DPRK leaders to have their negotiators resume participation in the talks.

### 2. JAPAN

Japan's relationship with North Korea was very difficult. Its former status as colonial ruler of the entire Korean Peninsula had left a legacy of hostility toward Japan on the part of both North and South Korea. Neither had wanted Japan to be part of the Six-Party Talks but they had yielded to American pressure to include Japan.

The lack of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea was a major agenda item in the Six-Party Talks. Japan, however, insisted that it would not agree to normalization or provide North Korea with benefits in the Six-Party Talks process until the issue of its citizens abducted by North Korea was resolved. North Korea's position, on the other hand, was that the abduction issue was already resolved. It repeatedly protested the Japan's negotiators' references to the abduction issue during plenary sessions of the Six-Party Talks. Along with increased Japanese sanctions against North Korea during 2006, the Japanese position on the abductee issue resulted in numerous North Korean statements that Japan was not qualified even to be a member of the Six-Party Talks.

In response to North Korea's position, South Korea and the U.S. became increasingly concerned that Japan's position was complicating the Six-Party Talks. While remaining discreet publicly, South Korean officials complained anonymously to the media about Japan's position on the abductee issue. The

U.S. initially was fully supportive of Japan's position on abductees at the Six-Party Talks and even declared that it would not remove North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism until the abductee issue was resolved. (Certain U.S. sanctions against North Korea could be lifted only when North Korea was removed from the list.) In 2006, however, some U.S. officials made public statements that suggested the U.S. might be willing to remove North Korea from the list even if the abductee issue was not resolved.

U.S. officials were not simply concerned that the Japanese position was endangering the prospects of immediate progress in the Six-Party Talks. The U.S. believed that any resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem would require that the other parties compensate the DPRK for giving up its nuclear programs. Just as Japan had provided South Korea with *de facto* compensation for its past colonial rule when they normalized relations in 1965, Japan was expected to provide North Korea with a major assistance package on normalization of their relations. That was believed to be one of the key incentives for North Korea to resolve the nuclear issue.

While Japan's short-term aim was resolution of the abductee issue, in the long-term it wanted to ensure lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. It feared that conflict there would involve direct or indirect military action. Japan was also apprehensive that an expansion of Chinese influence on both Koreas would reduce Japan's regional status. Tokyo recognized with growing concern that Beijing's broader regional aspirations might not be compatible with its own vision for the region. More importantly, Japan correctly concluded that the two powers might eventually become peer competitors in both the economic and security realms. Japan thus felt the need to be actively involved in international debate and negotiation about North Korea.

### 3. RUSSIA

Sharing a border with North Korea, Russia had a strategic interest in the Korean Peninsula since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was fought primarily over Korea. After WWII, the USSR established the DPRK and installed as its leader Kim Il Sung, who had served as an officer in the Soviet military. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation was initially preoccupied with domestic matters. In recent years, however, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and enjoying an economic boom thanks to its role as a leading oil producer, Russia again became actively interested in the Korean Peninsula. President Putin began courting North Korea shortly after his election as president. No longer limited by the Cold War, Russia was able to engage in peaceful dialogue with all the countries of Northeast Asia.

Russia wanted to be involved in North Korean nuclear talks from virtually the outset of the problem in the early 1990s. As noted above, like Japan, it resented its exclusion from the Four-Party Talks held from November 1997 to August 1999. In response, it proposed a six-party format that would include itself and Japan. Russia believed that Six-Party Talks should deal not only with the North Korean nuclear issue *per se* but also with its broader context and issues facing the Northeast Asian region as a whole. Through the talks, Russia aimed to increase its political influence on the peninsula and the entire region.

Putin's predecessor as president, Boris Yeltsin, was less "balanced" regarding North and South Korea than Putin proved to be. Yeltsin believed that South Korea and Russia needed to cooperate to dissuade Pyongyang from developing weapons of mass destruction, including long-range missiles and nuclear weapons. Moreover, Yeltsin positively appraised the South Korean government's efforts to reduce tensions between the two Koreas and to enhance stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Russia under Putin was increasingly fixated on a strategic competition with the United States, and the Korean Peninsula became yet another theater in that calculus. Russia hoped that it would be paid by the other parties in the Six-Party Talks for benefits to be provided to North Korea as part of a resolution of the nuclear issue. Most notably, Russia hoped that if North Korea were provided nuclear power reactors, the contract would be for Russian reactors. Russia was also actively promoting the use of North Korean territory to transship Russian natural gas to South Korea via the Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR).

Russia also had limited but significant and growing economic ties with the ROK. Since they established diplomatic ties in 1990, Seoul and Moscow cooperated most closely in the economic sector. In September 1995, for example, Prime Minister Chernomyrdin visited South Korea to sign a bilateral agreement to increase trade and economic, scientific and technological cooperation. Their bilateral relations continued to develop dynamically.

While seeking closer ties with the DPRK, Russia's position in the Six-Party Talks was close to that of South Korea. For example, Russia reportedly rejected a request from Japan to support its raising the abductee issue in the Six-Party Talks. Russian officials also backed South Korea's energy proposal during the February 2004 round of Six-Party Talks. South Korea reciprocated by, among other things, backing Moscow's bid to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).

#### 4. SOUTH KOREA

South Korea shared with the U.S. the goal of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but its approach to the problem differed fundamentally. With the end of the Cold War and North Korea's famine in the mid-1990s, South Korean attitudes toward North Korea began to change. The example of German unification made the collapse of the North Korean regime seem possible, and it inspired fear that the financial and political burden on South Korea might be too great to bear. The decisive moment, according to author and former journalist Don Oberdorfer, was June 13, 2000, when then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung was greeted on his arrival in Pyongyang by North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. The unprecedented North-South Korean summit brought an immediate and dramatic change in official and popular views in South Korea. Suddenly, North Korea was no longer seen as a threat by many South Koreans, and especially the younger generation. South Koreans became more concerned about the weakness of North Korea than its strength.

While the U.S. regarded the prospect of North Korea with nuclear weapons as a severe threat to its own national security as well as to its South Korea ally, many South Koreans assumed that North Korea would never launch a nuclear weapon against them. From the time of the administration of President Kim Dae-jung, South Korean policy was to use economic engagement of the North to reduce tensions and induce North Korean reforms. The aim was to prevent the collapse of North Korea while facilitating its economic growth and political reform, in the hope that "convergence" would result in reconciliation and eventually unification under mutually agreeable conditions. Thus, the ROK government and the U.S. administration of President George W. Bush were unable to cooperate extensively and effectively to deal with the challenges posed by North Korea. In 2005 and 2006, however, ROK-U.S. cooperation in the Six-Party Talks improved somewhat as the U.S. began to take a more flexible position.

Moreover, the diverging threat perception between South Korea and the U.S. regarding North Korea clouded their security alliance. The shared belief that North Korea posed a severe military threat to the South had been the binding force of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the primary reason for the continued stationing of American forces in South Korea. While South Koreans had a generally positive attitude toward the U.S., their feelings were complex, including elements of anti-American sentiment. The majority of the South Korean public still valued the U.S. military role on the Korean Peninsula, but the younger generation was less tolerant of the inconveniences and implied loss of sovereignty that came with a foreign military presence. Under such circumstances, an intensified hard-line U.S. approach against North Korea risked undermining the ROK-U.S. alliance.

#### III. ADVANTAGES OF THE SIX-PARTY TALKS

Due to a long history of foreign intervention, invasion, division, occupation, and domination of the Korean Peninsula, South Koreans were reluctant to see foreign involvement in North-South Korean affairs. Thus it was with mixed feelings, including even humiliation, that South Koreans observed the Six-Party Talks. Some South Koreans were also concerned that some or all of the parties had ulterior motives that were not necessarily consistent with South Korean interests or with the interests of the Korean nation as a whole.