

## US Perspectives on the Four-Party Talks

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**O**n 16 April 1996 President Clinton and South Korean President Kim Young Sam stood together on Cheju Island and jointly proposed "a four party meeting to promote peace on the Korean peninsula." Any attempt to analyze this proposal is of necessity an attempt to hit a moving target. As of the writing of this paper, the four-party talks had yet to begin formally and the process itself remained very fluid. After fifteen months of ambiguous responses, occasional dialogue, and unexplained delays, the first preparatory meeting was held in New York on 5 August 1997, at which all four parties participated. With this meeting, the four-party talks process arguably entered a new phase. After several starts and stops, joint briefings, and more than one incident that threatened to derail the entire process, all four parties (the United States, the Republic of Korea, China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) sat down at the same table for the first time since the end of the Korean War. Prior to the 5 August meeting, there was legitimate skepticism over whether or not the DPRK would ever come to the table. Now

however the question, arguably, has shifted to one of pace and content.

The four-party talks proposal itself marks a significant change in the decades-long search for a universally acceptable format to address the challenge of transforming the truce on the Korean peninsula to a real and lasting peace. One fundamental difference is the active role that has been played and is likely to be played by the United States after having left the initiative to North Korea for decades. As such, it is essential to understand US perspectives toward the talks.

Since the situation remains fluid, this paper will not focus on the daily ups and downs of the road to the talks, but instead upon the underlying interests of the United States in relation to the four-party talks process. On that basis, it will then assess the prospects for the talks and draw several conclusions.

### US Interests

In announcing the proposal for the talks, President Clinton repeated his pledge that "America would always stand by the unshakable alliance between our two countries," and reemphasized that "the United States is fully committed to the defense of South Korea."<sup>1</sup> Such statements have proliferated in recent years as US officials have sought to reassure the ROK, while at the same time making unprecedented strides in engaging the DPRK. In recent testimony before the Congress, US State Department officials have described the US efforts to promote the four-party talks process as being "rooted in the US–Republic of Korea security alliance. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

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1 State Department text of joint Clinton-Kim press conference, 16 April 1996, Cheju Island, Korea.

2 Statement of Charles Kartman, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 8 July 1997.

While such statements are a political indication of US priorities, the intended audience is more likely in Seoul than Washington. After over forty years of close bilateral cooperation in support of a policy based almost entirely on deterrence, ROK policy makers have been understandably unsettled by the process of US-DPRK engagement—no matter how closely coordinated between Seoul and Washington. The recognition of this discomfiture on the part of the ROK has led US officials to emphasize frequently the strength of the bilateral relationship, particularly the security alliance and blossoming trade and investment relations. Without questioning the veracity of such fervent expressions of alliance and mutual commitment, US perspectives on the four-party talks process are much better illuminated by an examination of core US interests than by a listing of the declarations of commitment that are ultimately an outgrowth of such interests.

### Stability

If public statements are any indication of actual US interests, "stability," both on the peninsula and in the broader region, is the primary concern of US policy makers. The particular need to focus on the stability of the Korean peninsula is driven by the perception that despite over forty years of deterrence-maintained peace, in the words of Congressman Doug Bereuter, chairman of the House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia: "There is no more volatile and unstable area in Asia, or perhaps in the world, than North Korea."<sup>3</sup>

This justification has been prominent at all levels including President Clinton's remarks immediately following the four-party talks proposal. He declared that the United States is

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3 Speech on "Prospects for U.S.-North Korean Relations: The Congressional Viewpoint" delivered on 12 June 1997 in Washington DC at the Center for Strategic and International Studies as published in *Korea Economic Update*, Korea Economic Institute of America, Volume 8, Number 3, June 1997.

determined "to do everything we can to help secure a stable and permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula."<sup>4</sup> In a June 1997 press statement, Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright expressed her hope that "The successful conclusion of a peace agreement would bring lasting peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula and contribute greatly to the peace and stability of the entire region."<sup>5</sup> Then Acting Assistant Secretary of State Charles Kartman was even more specific stating that "our overall policy goal is to build a durable and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula as a key contribution to regional stability. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this focus on stability is that it effectually underpins the other US objectives. The United States may support engagement of the DPRK, North-South dialogue, and even Korean unification. However, its foremost concern is likely to be the stability in the region which has prevented further direct conflict and which has maintained an environment that facilitated and even fostered economic growth.

From an economic perspective, there is no question of where US interests lie. In 1996, bilateral US-ROK trade totaled nearly \$50 billion. Bilateral trade with Japan and China, respectively, was \$183 and \$64 billion in the same year. Such economic interests, coupled with the presence of 37,000 American troops in Korea and the thousands of US citizens living in Seoul, of a necessity make stability a preeminent US objective. The political importance of the US troops, particularly in the defense community and in Congress, add weight to the American commitment.<sup>7</sup>

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4 State Department text of joint Clinton-Kim press conference, 16 April 1996, Cheju Island, Korea.

5 Press Statement by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, 30 June 1997. (<http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/statements>)

6 Statement before the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 8 July 1997, Washington, D.C.

7 Some in the United States suggest that such economic and security interests should place the U.S. commitment to Korea out of question. They express bewilderment at ROK fears that the United States will somehow opt for North

Stability might thus be accurately characterized as the touchstone by which policies impacting on the Korean Peninsula—including the four-party talks—are judged in the United States.

### Tension Reduction

A complementary objective to the maintenance of stability takes the process one step further. While the core US objective may be stability, American policy makers may also desire to “make the good better” and to further reduce tensions on the peninsula and in the region. Regardless of the eventual outcome of the talks, the diplomatic axiom of “talk is good” serves as a powerful incentive to keep the DPRK engaged in talks instead of giving it opportunity to provoke international reaction. Scott Snyder of the United States Institute of Peace has noted a “pattern of crisis escalation and its management as an essential element of negotiating the resolution of conflicts” in Korea, as well as the “role of crisis in spurring inter-Korean contact.”<sup>8</sup>

Alternately, tension reduction may be viewed as a necessary stepping stone to the future maintenance of stability. As North Korea’s economic and security situation continue to deteriorate, the potential for conflict may actually increase.<sup>9</sup> The proposal announcement of the four-party talks also included a call for a “wide range of tension reduction measures.”<sup>10</sup> Secretary

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Korea in favor of its traditional ally.

- 8 Snyder, Scott. “North Korean Crises and American Choices: managing U.S. Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula.” paper presented at the 1997 International Studies Association Convention, Toronto, Canada, March 1997.
- 9 Then US Ambassador to Korea James T. Laney warned that “There should be no doubt that North Korea’s decline does indeed pose risks for us. These range from diversionary military actions that could spiral out of control to a descent into chaos with effects spilling across the DPRK’s borders.” Laney, James T. “What are we going to do about North Korea?” *Korea Economic Update*, Korea Economic Institute of America, Volume 7, Number 4, July 1996.
- 10 State Department text of joint Clinton-Kim press conference, 16 April 1996, Cheju Island, Korea.

Albright was more specific, stating that "The purpose of the Four Party talks is to reduce tensions and build confidence on the Korean Peninsula with the aim of putting an end to the hostilities of the Korean War."<sup>11</sup> In this view, tension reduction is equally a prerequisite for and a product of the four-party talks process.

### **Bilateral and Global Issues**

In order fully to understand US interests related to the four-party talks process, it is necessary to understand the specific issues that drew the United States into its current engagement policy toward the DPRK. While the process of US opening toward the DPRK began with the waning of the Cold War, it has been primarily driven by American concern over issues of global importance. Foremost among such issues is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It was the DPRK announcement that it intended to withdraw from the NPT that sparked the intense period of rising tensions and negotiations that began in March of 1993 and culminated with the conclusion of the Geneva Agreed Framework in October of 1994. The export of missiles, particularly to the Middle East, has been another issue of prime concern to the United States and has resulted in a series of ongoing bilateral negotiations.

Beyond such global concerns, issues such as the search and recovery of the remains of US soldiers missing in action during the Korean War have resulted in yet another level of bilateral contacts. While there are no direct ties between such issues and the four-party peace talks, the linkages are clear. Progress in the four-party talks will likely help facilitate progress in these other areas and vice-versa.

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11 Press statement by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, 30 June 1997.  
(<http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/statements>)

### **Engaging China**

Some have suggested that the four-party talks is yet another venue for the United States to work on what is perhaps its most important future relationship in Northeast Asia, its ties with China. While US officials privately concede that any opportunity to work together with China in a productive manner is positive, they also emphasize that there are plenty of avenues for contact with China that are less difficult than the four-party talks. While there has been some suspicion from the outset about China's role in the talks, following the first preparatory meeting the general consensus seems to be that China is likely to play a balanced, positive role. At a recent forum in Washington D.C., a retired senior diplomat from China responded to the question of whether Beijing was likely to come down on the side of Seoul or Pyongyang by responding that "Beijing is on China's side."

The debate over the inclusion of China in the talks continues. Some view the Chinese as free riders who are willing to attend the talks to protect their own interests and to share in the accolades of any accomplishments, but who are unlikely to contribute actively to the process. Others voice concerns that Chinese inclusion strengthens the DPRK negotiating position and unnecessarily complicates the process. Still others are concerned that difficulties in US-Chinese relations may spill over and thus impede the talks. The inclusion of China, however, is evidence of a recognition that Chinese participation is necessary to ensure real stability on the peninsula and in the region and that good US-Chinese relations are important to success of the talks.

### **Unification**

From an ROK perspective, the four-party talks may have much broader implications than a mere "peace agreement." In the minds of many, any contact with North Korea is part of the process of unification. Naturally, the ROK must also be sensitive

to the impact of any peace-related initiatives on the prospects for unification. This sensitivity was manifest in July of 1997 when during testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Charles Kartman was asked to define US policy goals in Korea, including those relating to unification. Secretary Kartman responded that while unification per se was not a US goal, it was US policy to support its ally, the Republic of Korea, in its own efforts to resolve the unification question among Koreans. The buzz in the South Korean press the following morning was that Kartman had said that the "Unification was not the United States' Goal." The implication being that the United States was somehow opposed to or blocking unification. Indeed, there is much speculation in Seoul as to the intentions of China, Japan, the United States and Russia toward unification. Accurate or not, Japan is seen as the most openly hostile to the process of unification due to "fear" of competition from a stronger, larger, unified Korea. China is also seen as preferring the status quo, primarily due to a desire to keep a friendly regime as buffer and concern over the possible disposition of US troops in a unified Korea. Russia is seen as relatively uninvolved, but less than welcoming to a new and powerful Korea on its far-eastern borders. Finally, the United States is perceived as the most even-handed, neither fully supporting or opposing unification.

There is also no clear consensus on this issue in the United States. While there is some concern over the possible disposition of American forces following unification, it would be an exaggeration to say that this constitutes opposition to unification. As a policy, the United States has insisted that the unification issue must be resolved by the Koreans themselves. That said, however, the United States has attempted to promote inter-Korean dialogue as an integral part of its policy toward the DPRK. Then Acting Assistant Secretary of State Charles Kartman reacted to



Pyongyang's agreement to come to the preparatory conference for the talks by saying that "The DPRK's willingness to re-engage and to talk directly with ROK officials is a significant achievement in itself. This has been a major, longstanding US policy goal—to promote substantive, direct contacts between South and North Korean officials aimed at reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula."<sup>12</sup>

### North-South Dialogue

The United States insistence that "North-South dialogue" be included in the wording of the Geneva Agreed Framework was the most contentious issue in the negotiations. Throughout the process of engaging the DPRK, the United States has consistently played the role of facilitator for inter-Korean contacts. The most successful example of this role is likely the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) where inter-Korean cooperation has been remarkably smooth. The US Congress has been particularly sensitive to this issue, largely as a result of South Korean lobbying efforts. Administration officials are commonly questioned by the Congress regarding progress in North-South talks. There is a marked difference in the support given by the Congress to the four-party talks as opposed to the Agreed Framework in which the direct South Korean role was less prominent.

At the same time, there is a growing number of analysts in the United States who have begun to question the mantra of "North-South dialogue" —at least as a prerequisite for progress on other issues. Given the dramatic, and growing, disparity between the North and the South, such analysts question the feasibility of North-South dialogue in the traditional sense. Whereas dialogue

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12 Statement of Charles Kartman, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 8 July 1997.

during the Park Chung Hee era or even as recently as the Chun Doo Hwan era was between two relatively equal states, following the success of President Roh Tae Woo's Northern Policy and the recognition of South Korea by both Russia and China, the DPRK has been placed on fundamentally unsound footing. North Korea's dramatic economic decline and recent food crisis has further damaged its position. The DPRK has acknowledged this imbalance several times in recent negotiations. Among its initial responses to the four-party talks proposal was an expression of concern over the "uneven playing field" —particularly given the fact that neither Japan nor the United States have yet normalized relations with the DPRK. The compromise appears to be, perhaps by DPRK design, inter-Korean dialogue with the United States as a chaperone.<sup>13</sup>

### **Shooting beyond the Mark**

One reason that many in Seoul may question the US commitment to unification is the tendency on the part of some to link four-party talks, KEDO, investment, and any other avenues of engagement with the DPRK to unification. While the United States may envision the four-party talks process as one in which success may help facilitate the process of unification, there is little evidence of or support in the United States for using the four-party talks process as *de facto* unification talks. In fact, success in the four-party talks may depend on the ability of the United States and South Korea to resist such linkages. As difficult as the process of reaching a peace may be, the process of negotiating unification will probably be more difficult by orders of magnitude. To attempt to link them would almost certainly

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13 Few take seriously calls for the United States to play the role of an "honest broker." Given the close alliance between the United States and the ROK this is virtually impossible. However, that does not preclude the United States from playing the role of facilitator, as it did in securing the DPRK apology for the submarine incident.

doom the talks to failure. It is likely that a recognition of such challenges has led negotiators to place such emphasis on what may seem like trivial semantics, insisting that the talks are "four party," rather than two-plus-two, etc.

At a September 1997 seminar on North Korea sponsored by the Institute for International Economics, a group of approximately forty international specialists on North Korea were asked to predict where North Korea would be in five year's time. The options were (1) fundamentally unchanged, (2) fundamentally changed and reformist, (3) North Korea no longer in control, i.e. foreign or South Korean control, and (4) internal chaos, but no outside control. The responses in percentage probabilities were as follows: 25, 40, 26 and 9 percent respectively. In addition to the nearly even split between the first three scenarios, which itself is evidence of the lack of any consensus on the prospects for the DPRK, it is also interesting to note that the one way of interpreting the results is that there is a near 75 percent probability that Korea will not be unified in five years time. Yet much, if not a mirrored 75 percent, of the research currently conducted on North Korea focuses on unification or after unification. Relatively little focus has been placed on the key question of how to get there from here. If such opinions are to be given any weight, perhaps not only should unification be clearly de-linked from the four-party talks process, but much more effort should be devoted to how to negotiate or implement current tension reduction and confidence-building measures.

## Prospects for the Four-Party Talks

Given an understanding of the interests that drive US support for the four-party talks process, it is possible to examine factors likely to promote the success of the talks as well as potential obstacles.

### Positive Factors

#### *US commitment*

The fundamental difference between the four-party talks proposal and the myriad of proposals that have been issued by both the ROK and the DPRK over the past four decades is the active US participation in the process. The tradition peace proposal has been more of a ritualistic formula; South Korean proposals were not recognized by the North who claimed that Seoul was merely a US puppet and not a signatory to the armistice agreement, and North Korean proposals which sought to marginalize the South and deal directly with Washington were rejected out of hand by the United States. The end of the Cold War and North Korea's admission to the United Nations marked the beginning of a new phase in both inter-Korean negotiations—as evidenced by the inter-Korean accords of 1991 and 1992—and in US-DPRK relations. However, it was the American decision to negotiate the Geneva Agreed Framework with North Korea that marked a fundamental shift in US-DPRK ties. Although relations have yet to be normalized, by negotiating directly with Pyongyang on the nuclear issue the US gave the DPRK tacit recognition. This was a shift that the ROK, albeit reluctantly, supported.

While US-ROK coordination continued—and by most counts it has been closer than ever during this period—the US position vis-a-vis the DPRK and the ROK has inevitably shifted. The United States' tacit recognition of the DPRK and willingness to deal with it directly on bilateral issues has pushed Washington into the role of interlocutor and sometimes facilitator between

North and South. It is this new American role that makes the four-party talks fundamentally different from previous peace proposals.

The United States has used this role to become the principal driving force behind the talks. While the proposal is a joint US-ROK proposal, and while close US-ROK consultations continue, the United States is able to play the role of facilitator. Examples of this role include the US insistence that the explanation of the four-party talks proposal be given in a "joint briefing" and the US efforts on behalf of the ROK to secure a DPRK apology for the submarine incident. In both of these cases and more, it can be argued that without the US contribution, the process would have not moved forward.

#### *Policy linkages*

The US willingness to assume a facilitating role is partially driven by domestic political interests that will likely continue to push the process forward. The Geneva Agreed Framework and the four-party talks initiative together form the crux of the Clinton administration policy toward North Korea. The administration is deeply vested in the Geneva Agreed Framework and the four-party talks are essential to ensure the success of the Geneva Agreement on several levels. Though the success of the nuclear freeze and the progress of KEDO have been remarkable to date, the Agreed Framework cannot ultimately succeed without a significant improvement in North-South relations. In fact, even US support for KEDO and the Agreed Framework will be jeopardized without progress in inter-Korean cooperation which is in turn necessary to ensure the South Korean public's as well as financial support for the KEDO project. At a certain level the four-party talks proposal might be seen as a response to US Congressional pressure for North-South dialogue. Such pressure was clearly in evidence as the United States went to special lengths to ensure that tensions along the DMZ in July of 1997 did

not derail the 5 August 1997 preparatory meeting. From the perspective of the Clinton administration's relations with Congress, the very act of all four parties' sitting down together in New York was a success. Though the actual talks may be far off and very difficult, the administration can no longer be accused of sidelining the ROK.

Other policy considerations that are likely to motivate the United States to continue pushing the four-party talk process forward include the need to decrease inter-Korean tensions in order to facilitate progress on bilateral issues of particular concern to the United States such as the search and recovery of MIA remains, missile proliferation, and the need for US representation in Pyongyang as the number of Americans traveling to the DPRK continues to increase.

The North Korean food crisis is also a consideration. In this sense, the US decision to push the ROK to go ahead with the joint proposal may partially be a byproduct of US impatience with South Korean initiatives. Following the conclusion of the Agreed Framework, the United States repeatedly said that the initiative in dealing with the DPRK was in the hands of the ROK. For a variety of reasons, the apparent South Korean policy was one of inaction which resulted in a stalemate in inter-Korean talks. Washington's commitment to leave the initiative with Seoul was tested by the helicopter incident in late December of 1994, the difficult process of establishing KEDO, various incidents at the DMZ, and perhaps most prominently by the developing food crisis in North Korea. As nature abhors a vacuum, it is said that US politics abhors a stalemate—particularly with nightly news reports on increasing evidence of famine in North Korea. In the future, these factors will continue to push the administration to move the talks forward.

### *Realistic goals*

One final factor that is likely to contribute to the "success" of the four-party talks is the relatively low standards of success. It does not take much to mark an improvement over the status quo. American officials have been careful not to raise expectations for a quick resolution of the talks to end in a peace treaty. One US official privately commented that there was little difference between the current situation on the peninsula, and a situation in which a treaty were to be signed on paper, but in which tensions were not significantly reduced. In short, the US goal should be to establish a peace, rather than a peace treaty.<sup>14</sup> While no one expects the process to be easy, the same official commented that the "process is the outcome." In this regard, US goals are in line with US interests; namely stability and tension reduction, which are both expected to facilitate progress on a number of other fronts.

### **Potential Obstacles**

#### *Fundamentals*

The fundamental challenge of the four-party talks is the continued division of the Korean peninsula. All the American diplomatic maneuvering and other efforts will be of little use unless the two Koreas are able to reach some degree of compromise. The desire of both North and South for reunification on their own terms remains unabated. In the face of its recent failures, the DPRK's fundamental interest is clearly regime survival. Yet given the unabated competition for legitimacy between both Koreas, there remains serious questions as to whether reconciliation with the South may be inherently regime

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14 Robert Manning of the Progressive Policy Institute aptly observed that "if such a treaty is merely a paper commitment it could well be counterproductive." Testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 26 February 1997.

threatening to the North. Even the South's relatively moderate policy objective of a "soft landing" has, at its root, the assumption of an end to the DPRK regime. Thus the road ahead is likely to be rough, full of starts and stops, and various crises as the participants in the four-party talks attempt to separate issues of tension reduction and the establishment of a permanent peace—potentially in the form of peaceful co-existence—from the Korean desire for unification or regime survival.

#### *Alternate channels of dialogue*

Another possible threat to the four-party talks process could be the development of alternate channels of dialogue. This might be positive or negative, depending on the direction such channels take. For example, while less feasible at present, a dramatic improvement in direct North-South dialogue could render the four-party talks irrelevant, but may not necessarily be productive. In addition, coordination of US-DPRK bilateral issues may be more difficult given the other issues the US links to the four-party-talks process. Another alternative might include a shift to military dialogue as the DPRK has consistently requested, assuming the DPRK were to agree to a three-party dialogue including both the United States and the ROK. There could even be a devolution of the four-party talks on specifics to include the parties involved. While unlikely at present, these and other scenarios should be given serious consideration, particularly as the talks begin to address the more difficult issues.

#### *South Korean election*

One final possible challenge to the four-party talks process is the upcoming South Korean presidential election. While the election bears the potential of a new beginning in inter-Korean ties, there is also considerable question over whether or not the new president will honor his predecessor's agreements, includ-



ing the four-party talks proposal. The likelihood of a new president's declaring the four-party talks null and void may depend on their status. However, even if the talks have officially begun, there would likely be a need for some intensive discussions between the allies on this issue.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the four-party talks are a positive initiative that will probably continue to receive broad and active support from the United States. However, such talks are only one small part of a larger process of achieving a real and lasting peace on the Korean peninsula. The talks provide a forum for the United States and South Korea jointly to engage North Korea, and have the potential to keep North Korea actively engaged in a forward-looking dialogue rather than in destructive and destabilizing efforts that are inconsistent with US and South Korean interests.

The prospects for the talks are less clear. While such dialogue has merit in and of itself, the outcome of the four-party talks process is difficult to envision. There remain legitimate questions over the political will in both Seoul and Pyongyang to reconcile past resentments. From its weakened position, such reconciliation may to the DPRK appear threatening, while in its position of relative strength the ROK may be unwilling to accept anything short of unification on its own terms.

Nevertheless, given that "the process is the outcome," the prospects for the talks remain positive. The fundamental difference between the current four-party talks process and the numerous previous proposals for talks or the establishment of new peace agreement is the support of the United States. This support is possible as the talks are truly "four party" involving both China and the ROK. Despite some lingering suspicions, the consensus view in the United States appears to be that the talks

are ultimately in the US interest. As a result Washington will continue to push the process forward. How fast the process proceeds and its ultimate outcome, however, will depend on the two Koreas—as it should.