

There's No Such Thing as "Unconditional Talks"

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The recent US-China summit cited the importance of improving inter-Korean relations, and immediately after the US-China Joint Statement was announced, on January 20th North Korea made a proposal for inter-Korean high-level military talks. In response South Korea made a counter-proposal for preliminary talks; and thus the prospects for "dialogue," which had disappeared from view for a time, seem to have re-emerged as a point of interest between the two Koreas. The most interesting issue is the format of the talks - in other words, whether or not there should be conditions attached. This has erupted into a delicate psychological battle between the two Koreas, as well as within South Korean society. Is it better if talks are held unconditionally? And must the South avoid attaching conditions to talks during the upcoming round of inter-Korean dialogue? Or, what stance should the South take toward placing conditions on the talks?

South Korea has attached conditions to the talks proposed by the North. On January 26th the ROK defense minister proposed holding "working-level talks to prepare for high-level military talks" in Panmunjom on February 11th. In this message, addressed to People's Armed Forces Minister Kim Young Chun, it was made clear that the main agenda of the talks would be to secure North Korea's promise "to take responsible actions with regard to the Cheonan sinking and the shelling attack on Yeonpyeong

Island, and assurances that any recurrence would be prevented.” A commentary by a Unification Ministry representative suggested that the relevant authorities of the two Koreas should hold talks to establish a responsible position on the nuclear issue, stating, “For the sake of peace on the Korean peninsula and genuine progress in inter-Korean relations, North Korea’s intentions toward denuclearization must be reaffirmed.”

In response to South Korea’s proposal for conditional talks, North Korea argued that if the South had adopted a genuine pro-engagement stance then they should agree to hold talks unconditionally. On the same day that South Korea made its proposal for talks, a North Korean Foreign Ministry representative released a KCNA commentary which stated “It is necessary to guard against the assertions intended to unilaterally put up preconditions or deliberately set the order of various dialogues.” This was probably directed at the South’s insistence that any renewal of the 6 Party Talks must be preceded by inter-Korean talks on the issues of denuclearization and a statement of apology for the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong provocations.

It would be easy enough to hold talks which are proclaimed to be unconditional, and such talks could give the illusion of an easily achieved compromise. However, historically there has never been any such thing as truly unconditional talks. This is particularly true of bilateral talks. After all, they are not simply sitting down together to idly discuss the weather or their private lives. On the surface it appears that South Korea has attached conditions to the talks by insisting that North Korea apologize for its provocative acts and offer a clear statement on denuclearization as prerequisites for the inter-Korean talks. However North Korea’s refusal to accept the conditions set by South Korea can also be considered an adroit way of setting their own conditions for the talks. To put it another way, “conditions” are basically the agenda of the talks, and North Korea has refused to accept South Korea’s suggested agenda, insisting that a different agenda be established.

Both sides may choose whether to hold talks or not. Even warring countries may sometimes hold talks, while countries with relatively good relations may go for several years without meeting even once. This is because in order for two countries to commit to holding talks, they must have some need to talk in the first place. However if only one side feels the need for talks, then those talks are not likely to bear fruit. If the opposing side does not feel a mutual need for dialogue, even if they manage to sit down at the same table it will prove difficult to accomplish anything. Unless they are offered something that they want, progress will continue to be elusive.

Under the present circumstances it is hard to foresee North Korea apologizing or expressing regret for last year’s provocations, or offering any promises to prevent a recurrence. It seems equally unlikely that they will demonstrate any sincerity toward denuclearization.

South Korea feels a strong need to hold talks and extract an apology from the North, but the North does not feel the same urgency. Even if they offer an apology, their sincerity must inevitably be questioned. Therefore it would be a mistake to obsess about the talks themselves. The task for South Korea is to devise some sort of offer the North cannot refuse, regardless of whatever conditions the South places on the talks. The most fundamental factor in this effort will be establishing a deterrent. We should focus our efforts on securing our deterrent capacity for the long term. At the US-China summit the need for inter-Korean dialogue was brought up, but North Korea's follow-up proposal for talks immediately afterward was like adding a small dot at the end of a long line. In order to make this line bend in our favor we must be prepared to establish a new business relationship with North Korea. At this point in time, it will do us no good to get too bogged down in the talks themselves.