

**UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS
FOR THE SIX-PARTY TALKS:
NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR CRISIS
AND U.S. POLICY**

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the positions of the U.S. and North Korea on the 6-party talks and the prospect for the U.S.-North Korean relationship. The biggest goal of the U.S. through the 6-party talks is to make it known to the world that the U.S. is not the sole concerned party, but one among other countries concerned with this issue. The reason that the U.S. pursued the 6-party talks despite the North's strong resistance is that it wanted to prevent the issue from being aggravated due to North Korea's claim that the nuclear crisis was sparked by the U.S.' hostile policy, as well as possible future arguments involving the security guarantee and the scrapping of the nuclear program. It appears that North Korea agreed to the proposed 6-party talks, not the bilateral talks that it had asked for, because it needed to escape from the international isolation due to the aggravated situation, like the increased U.S. pressure and its own economic distress. North Korea must have wanted to find out the true intention of the U.S. while maintaining dialogue rather than aggravating its isolation by heightened tensions, and also to show the outside world that it has flexible and active

attitude toward dialogue with other countries. Despite the extremely conflicting positions between the U.S. and North Korea, however, the U.S.-North Korean relationship is likely to remain in a state of tension and stagnation rather than to fall into a catastrophic phase. North Korea seems to be interested in the 6-party talks, although it is not fully satisfied with it. But North Korea wants to make the 6-party talks bilateral talks in a real sense. The U.S. effort to pursue a dual strategy of appeasement and pressure is also likely to continue, because of the current situation that the U.S. faces, like the Iraq issue, the economy, and the presidential race. The U.S. also seems to believe that it has some time because North Korea may have technical problems in manufacturing nuclear weapons.

The North Korean nuclear crisis, which emerged with North Korea's admission to its highly enriched uranium nuclear program in October 2002, has eased thanks to the 6-party talks that were held in Beijing in August 2003. However, the future is still unclear. The biggest reason for such an unclear prospect is that North Korea maintains strategically ambiguous stances toward its nuclear program, alternately using threat and appeasement measures towards the international community. In fact, North Korea has upheld the necessity of nuclear weapons as nuclear deterrent, but at the same time, it has shown willingness to dismantle its nuclear programs in return for a U.S. security guarantee for the North Korean regime. This is why there are so many arguments about North Korea's true intention behind its nuclear program, whether it is only a negotiation card or a movement to actually possess nuclear weapons.

The U.S. policy toward North Korea is another factor that makes it difficult to predict the prospects for the nuclear crisis. The Bush admin-

istration has not hidden its strong mistrust in the Pyongyang regime, and even labeled it one member of the “Axis of Evil.” However, it has also been emphasizing that the nuclear issue should be resolved through peaceful means. So some questions come to the fore: Is the U.S.-North Korean relationship going to be normalized after a peaceful resolution of the crisis? If negotiations fail, will the U.S. choose a military option against North Korea? Is the U.S. considering the replacement of the Pyongyang regime?

The purpose of this article is to analyze the positions of the U.S. and North Korea on the 6-party talks and the prospect for the U.S.-North Korean relationship. It will also give some suggestions for the “security guarantee,” which will be a main issue in the second round of the 6-party talks.

The U.S. Position on the 6-Party Talks

As the War on Iraq ended, the U.S. began to be actively engaged in resolution of North Korea’s nuclear issue. The U.S. approach was dual: diplomacy and pressure. For the diplomacy, the U.S. suggested a multilateral approach of 5p + 5 in April, in which five permanent members of the UN Security Council and two Koreas, Japan, Australia, and EU were to participate. The 3-party talks between the U.S., North Korea, and China were held as preliminary talks in May. China, which believed the U.S. might move towards a military option, strongly urged North Korea to accept the talks, even though such a proposal was humiliating to the North.

As “the major combat was completed” on May 1, the U.S. pursued a more realistic multilateral format than a 5p+5 approach. This time the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Russia, and Japan were to participate in 6-party talks. The US negotiation team led by Mr. Kelly intended to figure out the North’s true intentions. For example, the U.S. was not nec-

essarily pessimistic about North Korea's announcement in the 3-party talks that it possesses nuclear weapons. North Korea's admission could wipe out the conspiracy view that the U.S. puts pressure on the North using its nuclear program as an excuse, and North Korea moved in the framework of the talks with the U.S.

The biggest goal of the U.S. through the 6-party talks is to make it known to the world that the U.S. is not the sole concerned party, but one among other countries concerned with this issue. The reason that the U.S. pursued the 6-party talks despite the North's strong resistance is that it wanted to prevent the issue from being aggravated due to North Korea's claim that the nuclear crisis was sparked by the U.S.' hostile policy, as well as possible future arguments involving the security guarantee and the scrapping of the nuclear program. In other words, it aimed to prevent the focus of the discussion from moving into a "security guarantee in return for the scrapping of the nuclear program" and to eliminate the arguments that the U.S. is responsible for the nuclear crisis.

Along with its diplomatic efforts, the U.S. has put pressure on the North with the PSI (Proliferation Security Initiative) and such issues as North Korean defectors and human rights. Also, the U.S. has hinted that even if the 6-party talks should fail, it has a stronger option. The peaceful resolution to this issue, as the U.S. believes, is to induce the North to abandon the nuclear program by juggling negotiations with and putting pressure on the North. In short, the U.S. has been making diplomatic efforts while continuing its pressure on the North with little consideration of military strikes on North Korean territory.¹

In the 6-party talks, the U.S. proposed a three-stage road map. In the first stage, the U.S. expands the humanitarian food aid in return for the North's announcement of the willingness to abandon its nuclear pro-

1 President Bush repeatedly said that the U.S. would not invade North Korean territory, but the military pressure on the shipping of missiles has not been ruled out.

gram and to return to the NPT. In the second stage, the U.S. analyzes North Korea's energy demand and is prepared to talk with North Korea on the conditions for removing the North from the list of terrorist sponsoring countries, while the North begins to dismantle its nuclear program. In the third stage, the U.S. actively handles North Korea's energy problem, when the North's nuclear program is completely dismantled. The U.S. is willing to discuss the North's security concern in order to normalize the relationship with North Korea in addition to other issues such as WMD, missiles, human rights, and abduction issues, when it is verified that North Korea does not have nuclear weapons.

The U.S. proposal seemed to be more flexible than its previous position that it would not present concessions in return for the North's scrapping of its nuclear programs. However, it was still far from North Korea's demand of a non-aggression pact before dismantling the nuclear program.

The U.S. effort to resolve North Korea's nuclear crisis diplomatically is attributed to limitations that it faces with regard to a military option. First, the U.S., which already waged two major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, needs some time to build up its military and diplomatic strength. Particularly, the U.S. is preoccupied with the Iraq issue due to the increasing number of casualties and the cost for reconstructing Iraq. President Bush announced that the U.S. would "Adjust and Adapt" in its policy towards Iraq in September. The U.S. began to seek international cooperation for the post-war Iraq policy, and asked for a U.N. Security Council resolution for an international force and a financial contribution by the international community. Moreover, it is time for the Bush administration to focus on the domestic economy in preparation for the 2004 presidential election.

Secondly, it is all but impossible to take a military option against North Korea without South Korea's full cooperation. The South Korean government, which believes that the North's nuclear program is noth-

ing more than a bargaining chip to gain a security guarantee from the U.S., however, has been determined to oppose the military option. According to a national survey conducted by KINU in May 2003,² only 11.6 percent of South Korean people responded that the purpose of North Korea's nuclear program is to possess nuclear weapons, while those who responded 'bargaining chip' and 'North Korea's domestic purpose' accounted for 41.6 percent and 46.8 percent respectively.

Thirdly, the possibility of North Korea's counterattack is another concern for the U.S. Sixty percent of the North's 1.2 million-soldier military force is forward deployed south of the Pyonyang-Wonsan line, and 11,000 artillery pieces are aimed at the Seoul metropolitan area. Thus, a huge number of casualties and destruction is expected at the early stage of war on the Korean Peninsula.

Although the above factors limit the U.S. military options, the hawkish group in Washington had not changed its negative perception towards North Korea and never considers concessions to the North. On the contrary, they believe that the rationale for the war on Iraq - WMD and liberation of the oppressed - could be applied to North Korea. In fact, the U.S. pursues international pressure on North Korea, along with diplomatic efforts. First, the U.S. has tried to squeeze the source of cash input through PSI. PSI is being implemented to interdict the shipping of drugs, missiles, counterfeit notes, and weapons in the name of law enforcement. PSI was proposed by President Bush on May 31 and 11 countries joined it.³

The U.S. also is trying to strengthen its military power on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. plans an 11 billion dollar military buildup⁴ and South Korea also increased its 2004 defense budget by 8.1 percent.

2 The face-to-face interview was done with the sample size of 1,000.

3 North Korean ship which was carrying heroin was interdicted near Australia in April 2003, and 29 crew members were indicted and still in an Australian jail.

4 The military buildup includes 24 AH-64 D Longbow Apache helicopters, 300 Patriot Missiles (PAC-3), MSRS, HARPY, AN/TPQ-36, 37.

The U.S. is also working on troop relocation. The troop relocation effort is being pursued in the context of a global military transformation, which aims at creating a more flexible, more lethal, lighter military. However, the troop relocation to the south of Han River would increase the counterattack capacity of U.S. forces against the North's invasion, and must be taken as a serious warning signal to the North.

Finally, the U.S. is paying more attention to North Korea's human rights and defectors. The U.S. Congress is trying to pass the Korean Peninsula Security and Freedom Act, which provides 200 million dollars to support democratization of North Korea and defectors. This act also urges the U.S. government to provide political asylum for North Korean defectors.

North Korea's Position on the 6-Party Talks

The North seemed to believe that it could get more concessions from the U.S. by putting pressure on it before the war on Iraq was over. North Korea's effort to start talks with the U.S. failed, however. Now North Korea is forced to decide whether it will possess nuclear deterrence against the U.S. military threat or seek a diplomatic solution by using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip.

North Korea shows an ambivalent message. In fact, North Korea's dual strategy of developing nuclear weapons and continuing negotiations at the same time is making the prospect for U.S.-North Korean relations all the more bleak. Although the North decided to participate in the 3-party talks, it said that the War on Iraq demonstrates the importance of a strong military deterrence to protect the national safety and sovereignty. It also tried to put pressures on the U.S. by escalating tension before and after the 3-party talks. North Korea said, "we are successfully reprocessing more than 8,000 spent fuel rods at the final phase."

In the 3-party talks, frustrated with the failure to have bilateral talks, the chief North Korean delegate, Lee Geun, said to his American counterpart, James Kelly, that the North possesses nuclear weapons.⁵ North Korea's admission of nuclear weapons is similar to the situation of October 2002, when the North confessed to its highly enriched uranium nuclear program. North Korea tried to defend itself from the U.S. pressure by showing a strong bargaining chip. It also wanted to induce the U.S. to stay in the negotiation room, since it was desperately running out of bargaining power due to its deteriorating economic situation. In sum, it tried to continue the dialogue with the U.S. on North Korea's agenda, not the U.S. agenda, while the U.S. insists on the dismantling of the nuclear program first.

It appears that North Korea agreed to the proposed 6-party talks, not the bilateral talks that it had asked for, because it needed to escape from the international isolation due to the aggravated situation, like the increased U.S. pressure and its own economic distress. North Korea must have wanted to find out the true intention of the U.S. while maintaining dialogue rather than aggravating its isolation by heightened tensions, and also to show the outside world that it has flexible and active attitude toward dialogue with other countries.

Also, against the backdrop of the intensifying nuclear crisis, the conflicts between the U.S. and South Korea as well as the internal conflict within South Korea were beneficial factors for North Korea. However, it was against the expectations of the North that the U.S.-South Korea conflicts were resolved with the summit meeting between the two countries, and that the conservative groups came to have greater say in South Korea. As the international opinions about the North's nuclear development are worsening, China's strong pressure on North Korea appears to have made it difficult for North Korea to resist any longer.

In the 6-party talks, the North suggested a principle of "package

5 *Washingtonpost.com*, December, 7, 2003.

deal, simultaneous action.” In the first stage, North Korea expresses its willingness to give up its nuclear program, while the U.S. resumes the supply of crude oil and expands food aid to a large extent. In the second stage, North Korea freezes its nuclear facilities and accepts inspection, while the U.S. signs the non-aggression pact and makes up for loss of electricity. In the third stage, North Korea resolves the missile issue in return for the normalization of diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Japan. In the fourth stage, North Korea completely dismantles its nuclear program, when the construction of two light water reactors is completed.

After the 6-party talks in Beijing, the North did not hide its frustration, saying that the U.S. request that the North give up its nuclear program first is a foolish game that even a 5-year-old child wouldn't like to play.

Prospects for the 6-Party Talks

The future prospects for the U.S.-North Korean relationship will be affected by North Korea's intention and U.S. policy: What does North Korea really want, nuclear weapons or negotiation? How is the U.S. going to harmonize diplomatic means and pressure? The following four scenarios are possible based on the above two factors.

Scenario A: Compromise

Scenario A is that North Korea's intention is to negotiate with the U.S. and the U.S. also continues diplomatic efforts. In this scenario, it is highly likely that both sides continue negotiation. This is the most promising scenario, and at least the 6-party talks are likely to go on in this case.

<Table 1> Four Scenarios

		North Korea's Intention	
		Negotiation	Nuclear Weapons
The U.S. Policy	Diplomacy	A	B
	Pressure	C	D

Scenario B: From Tension to Conflict

Scenario B is that North Korea's intention is to possess nuclear weapons but the U.S. relies on a diplomatic resolution. In this case, the tension gradually increases but the stagnation in the relationship between the U.S. and North Korea will continue for a while. The U.S. is not properly responding to North Korea's nuclear program.

The worst case in this scenario is that North Korea considers the U.S. appeasement as its weakness and tries to take advantage of it to move ahead to the development of nuclear weapons. The U.S. will move from a lower level of pressure to a higher level of pressure. Selective interdiction, expansion of economic sanctions, and diplomatic and military pressure will be taken step by step as policy options, and surgical strike cannot be ruled out as the last option.

Scenario C: Standoff

Scenario C is that North Korea wants to negotiate with the U.S. for gaining security guarantees and economic assistance, but the U.S. puts a high level of pressure on North Korea, ignoring a meaningful negotiation. The state of standoff may continue for the time being, however, if North Korea does not cross the red line.

The worst case in this scenario is that North Korea considers the U.S. pressure as an attempt to change the Kim Jong-il regime and vio-

lently responds. For example, North Korea might challenge the PSI.⁶ North Korea may launch missile tests or reprocess spent fuel for plutonium in order to get the U.S. re-engage. It is likely, however, that Bush administration raises pressure rather than give in.

Scenario D: Clash

Scenario D is that North Korea's goal is to have nuclear weapons and the U.S. exerts a high level of pressure. The 6-party talks will collapse and the U.S.-DPRK relations will develop into the worst situation.

Summary

Considering the conflicting interests between the U.S. and North Korea, it will be difficult to anticipate that the 6-party talks will bring an easy solution to this situation any time soon. Furthermore, the two countries are employing both threats and appeasement towards each other, making the future of the situation more unpredictable. Whatever North Korea's true intention is, it is unlikely that North Korea will abandon its nuclear programs without securing the U.S. security guarantee for its regime. Even though North Korea gains a security guarantee, it is not certain that it will give up nuclear program. North Korea's nuclear program is the most important leverage to attract attention, food, and assistance from the outside. North Korea without a nuclear program will become an international orphan. North Korea has also been developing nuclear arms as a prerequisite for its security, and it has recently been focusing on its nuclear development in order to cut its military spending.

6 North Korea said that international containment aiming at the North is encroachment of sovereignty and prelude to nuclear war.

In the meantime, the U.S. aims to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner. The situation that the U.S. is now facing may not change the ultimate goal of the U.S. If the goal is clear, difficulties can be overcome and endured. The U.S. has proclaimed that it may employ all possible policies if its efforts for a peaceful resolution fail. If it fails to find a solution to the nuclear crisis, it may enter another crisis situation.

Despite the extremely conflicting positions between the U.S. and North Korea, however, the U.S.-North Korean relationship is likely to remain in a state of tension and stagnation rather than to fall into a catastrophic phase. North Korea seems to be interested in the 6-party talks, although it is not fully satisfied with it. But North Korea wants to make the 6-party talks bilateral talks in a real sense. For that purpose, North Korea tries to minimize the roles of South Korea and Japan. North Korea refused to talk about nuclear issue with South Korean delegates who participated in the 12th round of ministerial talks that was held in Pyongyang on October 14 right after the 6-party talks.

North Korea also criticized Japan by saying on October 7, "Japan lost its position as a reliable member of the 6-party talks and is nothing but an obstacle to the peaceful resolution of nuclear issue between the U.S. and North Korea." North Korea also said that it would not tolerate the participation of Japan in any type of talks to resolve the nuclear issue. What North Korea tries to do is to keep Japan from raising the abduction issue and supporting the U.S., although it is not possible to get Japan out of the talks.

The U.S. effort to pursue a dual strategy of appeasement and pressure is also likely to continue, because of the current situation that the U.S. faces, like the Iraq issue, the economy, and the presidential race. The U.S. also seems to believe that it has some time because North Korea may have technical problems in manufacturing nuclear weapons.

North Korea's crossing the red line, such as conducting nuclear test

or reprocessing, would not necessarily be negative to the U.S. If the North does so, it will make the U.S. policy options more flexible because it can justify whatever it does. The U.S. can go to the UN Security Council without opposition, and even the option for a surgical strike could be on the table.

Concluding Remarks

The U.S.-North Korea relationship is now in a breakdown condition due to the conflicting arguments of the two and the mutual mistrust. In addition, even if it is not such an extremely dangerous situation such as North Korea's acceleration of its nuclear development and the U.S. pursuit of military strikes against North Korea, there still exists a possibility that U.S.-North Korea relations could be aggravated at any time due to mistrust. For example, if North Korea takes advantage of the U.S. limitations for putting pressure on North Korea by intensifying the crisis, or if North Korea recognizes the U.S. pressure as a movement to topple its regime, the U.S.-North Korea relationship may enter another crisis situation. In addition, it is still unclear whether the resolution of the nuclear crisis without any fundamental changes in the North Korean regime would lead to the normalization of the U.S.-North Korea relationship.

As the nuclear crisis gets worse, North Korea tries to approach the South more actively. North Korea wants to show its sincerity to the international community for reform and opening as well as reconciliation with the South. It also tries to make mischief between the U.S. and South Korea. The conflict in the relations between the U.S. and North Korea will inevitably have a negative impact on inter-Korean relations in the long-run. Therefore, South Korea should prepare for the situation in case a peaceful resolution fails. It is undesirable not to prepare a contingency plan because of the concern that such a preparation may

increase tension. More specifically, South Korea should prepare for all possible scenarios: selective interdiction, diplomatic and military pressure, and even surgical strikes.

As for the security guarantee, North Korea demands a security guarantee for the Kim Jong-il regime as well as for the country. It is impossible to give a security guarantee for the regime, however. A non-aggression pact will affect the U.S.-ROK alliance, which assumes North Korea as a potential enemy. It is desirable that all the countries sign a document in which no country should threaten or attack any other country. North Korea triggered two naval clashes despite South Korea's sunshine policy and is escalating tensions in the region by developing a nuclear program. South Korea is also under the threat of North Korea's chemical and biological weapons. Therefore, not only North Korea but also South Korea and Japan need security guarantees.

It is time to bring peace on the Korean Peninsula by ending North Korea's nuclear program. For that purpose, cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea and political stability and unity in the South are indispensable elements.