

# *Six-Party Talks: “Action for Action” and the Formalization of Regional Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia*

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## **Abstract**

The reemergence of a second North Korean nuclear crisis in October of 2002 has underscored the fragility of regional relations and highlighted the continuing proliferation dangers posed by North Korea’s ongoing nuclear development efforts. The regional response to the crisis through the establishment of Six-Party Talks in August of 2003 marked a new phase in efforts to develop regional multilateral dialogue to address regional security issues. This paper will analyze the significance of the Six-Party Talks, the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of Principles, and the February 13, 2007 implementing agreement from two perspectives. First, the author will conduct a detailed examination of the “action for action” principle cited in both the Joint Statement and the implementing agreement, analyze its significance and implementation, and analyze implications for the next steps toward the fulfillment of the objectives identified in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement. Second, the Six-Party Talks will be considered as the latest stage in a series of ad hoc multilateral efforts over the past two decades to overcome strategic mistrust in Northeast Asia.

**Keywords:** North Korean nuclear crisis, action for action, regional security dialogue, Six-Party Talks, US-DPRK relations

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## Introduction

The reemergence of a second North Korean nuclear crisis in October of 2002 has underscored the fragility of regional relations and highlighted the continuing proliferation dangers posed by North Korea's ongoing nuclear development efforts. The escalation of tensions rapidly erased a concrete but limited record of cooperation that had been built in the context of implementation of the 1994 US-DPRK Geneva Agreed Framework, through which North Korea pledged to give up its nuclear program in return for the provision of two light water reactors to North Korea by a US-led multinational consortium. The unraveling of the Agreed Framework in December of 2002 and January of 2003 deepened levels of mutual mistrust between the United States and North Korea to levels that equaled or surpassed those of the first crisis and constrained the development of inter-Korean relations following an historic summit in June of 2000.

The regional response to the crisis through the establishment of Six-Party Talks in August of 2003 marked a new phase in efforts to develop regional multilateral dialogue to address regional security issues. The multilateral dialogue faced an even more difficult challenge as a second attempt to overcome deep-seated mistrust and to build confidence through a shared record of cooperation between the United States and North Korea—this time ratified, supported, and witnessed by all major concerned regional parties. Whether or not such a record could be built in light of past failures would depend on whether support could be built on the basis of “commitment-for-commitment” and “action-for-action” pledges represented in a September 19, 2005, Joint Statement of Principles, the first official effort by the parties of Northeast Asia to forge regional consensus through multilateral negotiations.

Despite repeated attempts since the late 1980s to formalize a regional security dialogue mechanism for the purpose of addressing

security issues in Northeast Asia, the second North Korean nuclear crisis highlighted the absence of regional security institutions in Northeast Asia in contrast to almost every other region of the world, leading some analysts to refer to Northeast Asia as an “anti-region.”<sup>1</sup> Ironically, although tensions on the Korean peninsula have often been cited as the primary obstacle to the promotion of regional security cooperation in Northeast Asia, the North Korean nuclear crisis has also long been the primary catalyst for promoting multilateral cooperation among neighboring stakeholders surrounding the Korean peninsula. In this respect, the Six-Party Talks represents the latest phase in ongoing efforts to develop multilateral cooperation in response to the greatest source of instability that the parties in Northeast Asia collectively face; the prospect of instability that derives from North Korea’s inability to integrate itself with a broader set of collective interests in the promotion of stability and prosperity. The success or failure of the Six-Party Talks will depend on the ability of all parties to build a concrete record of shared cooperation in the service of jointly identified objectives of denuclearization, political normalization, economic development, and the establishment of a permanent peace in Northeast Asia.

This paper will analyze the significance of the Six-Party Talks, the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of Principles, and the February 13, 2007 implementing agreement from two perspectives. First, the author will conduct a detailed examination of the “action for action” principle cited in both the Joint Statement and the implementing agreement, analyze its significance and implementation, and analyze implications for the next steps toward the fulfillment of the objectives identified in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Evans, “Constructing Multilateralism in an Anti-Region: From Six-Party Talks to a Regional Security Framework in Northeast Asia?” conference paper presented at Stanford University Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center conference on “Crosscurrents: Regionalism and Nationalism in Northeast Asia,” May 2006.

Second, the Six-Party Talks will be considered as the latest stage in a series of ad hoc multilateral efforts over the past two decades to overcome strategic mistrust in Northeast Asia.

### **Six-Party Talks and the Evolution of the “Action for Action” Principle**

In the early rounds of the Six-Party Talks, the American unwillingness to meet bilaterally with the DPRK and the conditional nature of US and DPRK opening positions (whereby the other side was required to meet demands before one’s own side was willing to undertake reciprocal actions) were two major obstacles that blocked forward movement in six-party negotiations. The DPRK sought bilateral negotiations with the United States and the simultaneous implementation of commitments as essential prerequisites for being willing to move forward. The evolution of the US position on these two issues has been a critical factor in shaping the current agreement and will continue to play a major role in influencing prospects for its effective implementation.<sup>2</sup>

The hard-line positions of both the United States and North Korea in the early rounds of Six-Party Talks reflected a mutual disinterest in pursuing substantive negotiations, despite their participation in six party meetings. The DPRK sought a direct dialogue with the United States on core security issues, while the United States perceived the Six-Party Talks primarily as a vehicle for crisis management and a tool for isolating the DPRK from taking measures to escalate the crisis.<sup>3</sup> The first three rounds of six-party dialogue were

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed analysis of the Bush administration’s approach to North Korea, see Curtis Martin, “US Policy Toward North Korea Under G. W. Bush: A Critical Perspective,” paper presented at the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, Feb. 28-March 3, 2007.

<sup>3</sup>See Scott Snyder, Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman, “USIP Peace Briefing: Whith-

distinguished more by voicing each side's demands than by give-and-take negotiations. Although the United States and DPRK finally put forward concrete "comprehensive dismantlement" and "reward for freeze" proposals in June of 2004, the conditional nature of the respective proposals illustrated the depth of the impasse.<sup>4</sup> The third round of six-party talks was followed by a one-year hiatus in the talks amidst the US 2004 presidential election campaign and resulting changes in the second-term line-up of the Bush administration following the elections.

The fourth round of Six-Party Talks resumed as a result of a notable change in the tactics of the Bush administration in its second term; namely, a willingness to have bilateral meetings with North Korea in the context of the Six-Party Talks. Following public assurances by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the United States recognized the sovereignty of the DPRK, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill met with DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan in a meeting brokered by the Chinese in Beijing in July of 2005 to announce the resumption of the six-party process. The announcement of the resumption of talks itself came in the context of a bilateral US-DPRK meeting, and paved the way for a quite different US approach to the Six-Party Talks, in which plenary sessions were de-emphasized in favor of bilateral meetings with the DPRK and other parties to discuss the principles that should underlie progress on the Korean peninsula.

The result was the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of Principles, an understanding endorsed by the six parties that was hailed as a guideline for pursuing a more concrete negotiation of specifics and enshrined the principle of "word for word, and action for

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er the Six-Party Talks," May 2006, [http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace\\_briefings/2006/0517\\_six\\_party\\_talks.html](http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/0517_six_party_talks.html).

<sup>4</sup> See Scott Snyder, "The Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Assessing US and DPRK Negotiating Strategies," *Pacific Focus*, forthcoming, 2007.

action,” another way of describing North Korea’s long-standing “tit-for-tat” approach to dealing with the United States.<sup>5</sup> This term suggested that parties would be required to take simultaneous concrete actions to realize the principles embodied in the Joint Statement, laying the foundation for a more detailed negotiation process through which each side would be expected to accommodate the other as the means of reaching a negotiated settlement. The only way to bridge the high level of mutual mistrust between the United States and the DPRK would be a process that required both sides to take concrete simultaneous actions to prove good faith to the other side by performance rather than promises.

Two roadblocks emerged to stall the talks, both of which illustrated the practical challenges inherent in defining and implementing “action for action.” The first roadblock, which emerged immediately upon the announcement of the Joint Statement, was a difference in interpretation between the United States and North Korea over the timing of provision of light water reactors (LWRs) as part of North Korea’s right to utilize nuclear power as a means for pursuing peaceful energy production. While the DPRK insisted that the provision of LWRs was a precondition for its return to the NPT, the United States argued that only after North Korea had returned to the NPT would it be possible to begin a discussion of the provision of LWRs to North Korea.<sup>6</sup>

A second roadblock involved the initiation of a Section 311 announcement by the US Treasury into the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA), which had been suspected of complicity in DPRK alleged money laundering and counterfeiting activities. The

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<sup>5</sup>Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy With North Korea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>See Jack Pritchard, “Six-Party Talks Update: False Start or a Case for Optimism,” Brookings Institution, *The Changing Korean Peninsula and the Future of East Asia*, December 1, 2005, see <http://www.brook.edu/fp/cnaps/events/20051201presentation.pdf>, accessed on January 29, 2007.

September 15<sup>th</sup> US Treasury announcement drew little notice in the run-up to the successful conclusion of six-party negotiations, but resulted in a run on the bank in Macao that caused the Macao Monetary Authorities to seize control over the bank and freeze its assets. Although the United States government described the BDA action as a “defensive measure” designed to protect the integrity of the US dollar against counterfeiting, the DPRK saw the moves as aggressive measures that contradicted the spirit of the September 19<sup>th</sup> Joint Statement.<sup>7</sup>

DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan made the BDA issue the central focus of six-party meetings that convened briefly in November, blocking progress in negotiations to implement the joint statement and insisting that the US “financial sanctions” against the DPRK be lifted prior to the resumption of negotiations. This demand resulted in another one-year suspension of Six-Party Talks as the DPRK made resolution of the BDA issue a prerequisite for resuming six-party negotiations on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. On the other hand, the United States insisted that the BDA issue was a legal matter involving suspected counterfeiting and money laundering; as such it should be dealt with separately from political negotiations such as the Six-Party Talks. Both of these roadblocks and their respective handling by the two sides provided a clear illustration of how difficult it would be for the United States and DPRK, respectively, to abandon conditional approaches to negotiation in favor of a formula that required simultaneous implementation of objectives embodied in the Joint Statement; i.e., North Korea’s implementation of denuclearization in parallel with the US implementation of diplomatic normalization with the DPRK, provision of

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the US financial actions vis-à-vis BDA and North Korea, see Tae-hwan Kwak and Seung-ho Joo, “The US Financial Sanctions Against North Korea,” paper presented at the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, Feb. 28-March 3, 2007.

international economic assistance, and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

### **The Significance of “Action for Action”: A Tactical or a Strategic Change in Addressing North Korea’s Nuclear Challenge?**

The North Korean nuclear test catalyzed a new approach to dealing with North Korea, raising questions among many observers in Japan and South Korea as to whether the United States made a tactical or strategic change in its approach to North Korea’s denuclearization. Following the North Korean nuclear test and the adoption of a unanimous resolution of the UN Security Council slapping sanctions on trade with North Korea involving nuclear or missile components, large-scale conventional arms, and luxury goods, the United States appeared to have made a dramatic shift from punishment of North Korea to renewed negotiations with the DPRK on terms that accepted both the need for bilateral negotiation and the necessity of simultaneity in implementation of obligations on both sides.<sup>8</sup>

Assistant Secretary Christopher Hill held another surprising meeting with DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan in late October to announce North Korea’s return to the Six-Party Talks. Hill also met bilaterally with the North Koreans in late November to provide the DPRK with a list of concrete proposals for moving forward in improving US-DPRK relations in the context of North Korea’s fulfillment of its denuclearization commitments. The DPRK side continued to insist that North Korea’s money be unfrozen from its BDA accounts and that DPRK access to international banking

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<sup>8</sup>United Nations Security Council S/RES/1718 (2006), <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/572/07/PDF/N0657207.pdf?OpenElement>, accessed on May 6, 2007.



privileges be restored. Although negotiations on the financial issue were held alongside Six-Party Talks in Beijing in December of 2006, there was no evident progress during that set of meetings. Instead, Assistant Secretary Hill and Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan reached an understanding regarding how to proceed at a bilateral meeting in Berlin which set the stage for the resumption of Six-Party Talks and the announcement of the February 13, 2007, agreement on Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement.

The process leading up to the agreement is important to fully understand the nature and significance of the actions to be undertaken by the United States, North Korea, and the other parties as part of the implementation of the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement. Namely, the February 13<sup>th</sup> implementing agreement constitutes the officially ratified outcome of the six-party process, but does not fully reflect the understanding developed between the United States and North Korea in Berlin in January. The initial “action for action” roadmap contained in the implementing agreement does not address the resolution of the issue of North Korea’s frozen accounts in BDA or its inability to utilize the international financial system to move its financial resources following the US Treasury action and in light of sanctions on North Korea imposed by the UN Security Council Resolution 1718. However, the DPRK clearly includes Berlin pledges on the financial issue as part of the “action” that the United States must fulfill prior to the DPRK taking steps to shut down its reactor. Thus, an assessment of the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement in isolation from the US-DPRK Berlin discussions is incomplete.

The significance of the Berlin discussions as they relate to implementation of the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement is revealed in a report by the pro-North Korean newspaper *Chosun Sinbo*, which has increasingly been used by the North Koreans to signal their views on six-party-related issues. A *Chosun Sinbo* dispatch released during the third stage of Six-Party Talks revealed that the United States gave

assurances that it would lift “financial sanctions” on BDA within 30 days, while the DPRK would shut down its 5 Megawatt reactor and allow IAEA inspectors to monitor the plant within 60 days in return for 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil.<sup>9</sup> The BDA issue is not mentioned in the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement but clearly became the main sticking point in North Korea’s willingness to proceed with its first-phase obligations by the April 14<sup>th</sup> deadline that had been envisaged in the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement.

Thus, it is clear that a bilateral understanding had been reached in Berlin between Chris Hill and Kim Kye-gwan that the BDA issue would be resolved as a prerequisite for the implementation of the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement, but in the absence of a public record of the nature of the bilateral agreement between the United States and DPRK, it is impossible to determine whether the misunderstandings surrounding the resolution of the BDA issue are due to a lack of specificity in the bilateral understanding or to North Korea’s reinterpretation of the meaning of the bilateral understanding as a delaying tactic and in order to maximize tangible benefits from the agreement. It is also not clear whether the US obligation was only to ensure that the money was released or to also provide the DPRK with a financial mechanism for transferring the funds. All of these issues have come up as obstacles delaying the implementation of the initial steps under the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement. The emergence of such a misunderstanding serves to underscore the importance of the Six-Party Talks as a forum in which it is possible for third parties to verify and ratify bilateral obligations between the United States and DPRK so as to avoid further deepening of mistrust.

The missteps and delays over the unwinding of the BDA issue

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<sup>9</sup> Kim Chi-yong, “Third Stage of Fifth Round of Six-Party Talks—The United States ‘Betrayal’ Creates Impasse—Factor That Makes it Difficult to Take Initial Stage Steps and To Reach Agreement,” *Choson Sinbo*, February 11, 2007, Korean internet version.

point to the depth of the cultural and political misunderstanding between the United States and North Korea that must be overcome. The United States had initially claimed that the US Treasury action against BDA was a legal matter and a “defensive measure” to protect US currency against counterfeiting; however, the North Koreans saw the issue as additional evidence of the US “hostile policy” and as evidence of American bad faith that had contravened the spirit of the Joint Statement. For North Korea’s leadership, politics always trumps legal matters; thus, the DPRK sought a political decision from the United States that would unfreeze North Korean assets as evidence of American political will to deal with North Korea on different terms from those that had previously characterized the relationship. American positive actions toward North Korea were perceived as a litmus test of American intentions in light of the chasm of mistrust that had built up over half a century. At the same time, unverified assertions from the US Treasury Department’s Daniel Glaser that cash turned over to North Korea would be used for “humanitarian purposes” were a humiliation following the Treasury’s aggressive handling of North Korean accounts in the context of terrorist and WMD financing networks, especially given the lack of transparency of North Korea’s financial system.

From Pyongyang’s perspective, the return of North Korea’s cash would be direct evidence of a change in US intentions, but it also contravened US support for international rule of law and sent the message to Pyongyang that North Korea could continue to expect exceptional treatment outside the bounds of international rules. However, the idea that the United States would make exceptions to the international rules in order to accommodate a regime like that of North Korea rubs many American observers the wrong way. Such exceptions run the risk of teaching the North Koreans the same wrong lesson that the North Koreans have taken from other interactions with the international community on a wide range of issues from

humanitarian aid to human rights.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement is that the Bush administration has in practice set aside concerns over simultaneity and has even agreed to “go first” by attempting to resolve the BDA issue prior to implementation of joint obligations in the first phase of actions envisioned by the agreement. In effect, Christopher Hill has tried to provide the leadership in Pyongyang with political steps designed to prove that the United States indeed does not have a “hostile policy” toward North Korea. By moving forward first to take a unilateral measure of good will toward the DPRK, the show of good faith on the part of the United States will put pressure on North Korea to fulfill its obligations.<sup>11</sup> Failure to respond to positive American unilateral steps in the context of the six-party process would in principle lead to North Korea’s further isolation by the other members of the Six-Party Talks. Such a strategy represents a very different approach by the United States to its interactions with the North; according to this logic, the faster the United States improves relations with North Korea, the more pressure Pyongyang will face to move forward with denuclearization. But the early technical problems with implementation of the February 13<sup>th</sup> statement raise serious questions about how long the process will take and how far it will go. Christopher Hill’s analogy to a video game in which each level of the game has an increasing level of difficulty is not reassuring; in fact, the analogy suggests that the parties may fail many times before being able to master the game.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Bruce Klingner, *Banco Delta Asia Ruling Complicates North Korean Nuclear Deal*, Heritage Web Memo #198, March 15, 2007. Accessed at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1398.cfm> on May 6, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> This concept, known as reciprocal unilateral measures (RUMs), was developed through detailed study of the US-Soviet arms control experience at Stanford University’s Center for International Security and Cooperation in the early 1990s.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Hill, remarks at Georgetown University conference, entitled “The Future of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia,” March 26, 2007.

The analogy also betrays a danger in the current approach that the tactical changes in the Bush administration's approach to Pyongyang, if not implemented effectively, may have strategic consequences in the form of ultimate acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, particularly if steps toward denuclearization stall and states lose political will to enforce existing UN Security Council resolutions. While the United States must move toward diplomatic normalization with North Korea in order to induce Pyongyang's reciprocal performance in taking practical measures towards denuclearization, such a strategy also requires continuing pressure to ensure that North Korea fulfills its obligations. But North Korean leaders continue to regard such pressure as ill-will and evidence of a continuing "hostile policy" on the part of the United States, while seeking political and economic guarantees of regime survival that would perpetuate North Korea as an exceptional country rather than integrating it effectively into the international community.

The North has shown its distrust of the United States and other members of the Six-Party Talks by attempting to maximize tangible benefits while minimizing its obligations under the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement. At the same time, the DPRK has repeated assurances that it is committed to the implementation of the agreement, putting the onus for delay on the United States. The United Nations Security Council sanctions remain in place as a constraint on North Korea's capacity to interact with the international community. While the implementation of the UN sanctions under resolutions 1695 and 1718 remain suspended as of this writing, the North Koreans have also tested the resolve of the six parties to determine what they can get away with under current circumstances. The North's insistence on the ability to transfer BDA funds represents one test; the US decision to look the other way while North Korea sold military goods to Ethiopia was another striking development that served in practice to weaken

the threat of UN sanctions against the North.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the North has utilized inter-Korean economic negotiations to test whether South Korea would be willing to provide pledged rice assistance on a humanitarian basis despite the North's lack of movement to implement the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement.

A final potential sticking point in the spirit of "action for action" lies in the establishment of five working groups on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, normalization of US-DPRK relations, normalization of DPRK-Japan relations, economy and energy cooperation, and Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism. The February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement states that "plans made by the five working groups will be implemented as a whole in a coordinated manner."<sup>14</sup> Although all five working groups were able to meet within 30 days as envisioned, the tone of the brief meeting of the Japan-DPRK working group held in Hanoi on March 7<sup>th</sup> (especially compared to that of the US-DPRK working group held in New York at the same time) illustrated the challenges inherent in keeping the working groups moving forward in parallel. A steady stream of criticism from *Chosun Sinbo* and other North Korean media sources very clearly illustrates North Korean unwillingness to move forward with Japan as long as the abduction issue remains the priority concern of Japan in its relations with the DPRK. The Japan-DPRK meeting in Hanoi illustrated that a working-group meeting will be ineffective in resolving the important issues between Japan and the DPRK. A much higher level of engagement between the two sides will be necessary, most likely through quiet diplomacy involving senior envoys of the respective leaders under circumstances that are propitious to a more relaxed approach by both sides. But it is hard to imagine real "action for

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<sup>13</sup>Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, "North Koreans Arm Ethiopians As US Assents," *New York Times*, April 8, 2007, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>"Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement," Beijing, February 13, 2007.

action” steps being taken at this time given the intransigent nature of the respective initial negotiations positions of both sides. It will be very hard for progress in the Japan-DPRK working group to be implemented in a “coordinated manner” with that of other working groups without serious consideration of a change in approach by both sides.

### **Six-Party Talks: Latest Stage in Ad Hoc Multilateralism in Northeast Asia**

Among the working groups established under the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement, the working group to establish a Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism is the one that requires the most long-term vision. Although the list of efforts to promote regional cooperation in Northeast Asia predates the emergence of the North Korean nuclear crisis, the challenge of alleviating tensions on the Korean peninsula has been at the center of all of these efforts. Mikhail Gorbachev proposed expanded regional cooperation on the model of the Council for Security Cooperation in Europe at a Vladivostok speech in the late 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Roh Tae-woo put forward proposals for a consultative conference to end Korean division in a speech to the United Nations in 1988.<sup>16</sup> Even former US Secretary of State Jim Baker advocated the establishment of a regional mechanism for dealing with Korean tensions in 1992.<sup>17</sup> None of these proposals gained traction as viable mechanisms for multilateral management of Northeast Asia’s security problems.

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<sup>15</sup> *Izvestiya*, “European Peace Charter,” August 1, 1986, as translated by BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, August 5, 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Lewis, “South Korean Chief, at UN, Calls for World Talks and Unification,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> James A. Baker III, “America in Asia: Emerging Architecture for a Pacific Community,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1991/1992, Vol. 70, No. 5, pp. 1-18.

With the emergence of the first North Korean nuclear crisis and DPRK threats to withdraw from the NPT, the IAEA referred the matter to the United Nations in 1993, and the UN Security Council called for dialogue among interested parties. Under the Clinton administration, the United States responded to the call and initiated a bilateral dialogue with the DPRK, much to the shock and chagrin of the Kim Young Sam administration. That dialogue eventually resulted in the Geneva Agreed Framework, but that agreement could not be implemented by the United States alone without support from its allies, and decided to form a multilateral consortium named the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), to implement the terms of the deal. Although South Korean and Japanese leaders understandably complained about “no taxation without representation,” since the United States signed the agreement but asked its allies to sign the check to pay for its implementation.

The negotiation of the bilateral Geneva Agreed Framework provided the best evidence that a bilateral approach to solving North Korea-related issues, while necessary, was insufficient. KEDO represented a very practical step forward in forging multilateral cooperation to meet North Korea’s energy security needs as a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, but as an exercise in multilateral cooperation, the core membership was incomplete. The European Union joined South Korea and Japan on the board, but Russia and China remained aloof from the organization for their own reasons.<sup>18</sup>

Another step forward in developing multilateral cooperation to solve Northeast Asian regional issues was the establishment of the Four Party Talks (two Koreas, US, and China), despite North Korea’s initial reluctance to join. But this dialogue never really got off the ground due to North Korea’s own struggle for survival during the peak

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<sup>18</sup> See Scott Snyder, “The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization: Implications for Northeast Asian Regional Security Cooperation?” University of British Columbia Working Paper Series, 2000.



of the famine in 1996-1998. The four party talks did more to promote Chinese cooperation with the United States and South Korea than to address problems involving North Korea.

A third form of multilateral cooperation involved the establishment of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. This group did much to overcome differences among allies in support of the Perry Process in the late 1990s, as all parties supported cooperative efforts to engage North Korea in more active cooperation on the basis of Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy. Suspicions about covert North Korean nuclear efforts at Keumchangri (later proved unfounded) and North Korea's Taepodong launch in 1998 catalyzed the establishment of TCOG to address differences in policy priorities among the three countries.

Through the mid 1990s, China had always been reluctant to participate in multilateral forums. China's approach in the initial years of the ASEAN Regional Forum was cautious and skeptical. But the development of China's "new security concept" in the late 1990s accepted globalization as an opportunity that both safeguarded conditions of regional peace necessary for China's economic development strategy and as a tool by which China could improve relations with neighboring countries on China's periphery. As Chinese leaders overcame fears that multilateralism might be a tool through which China would be isolated, they began to realize that active multilateralism could be used to bring other parties on board and bind them to a common set of objectives.<sup>19</sup> These changes were essential prerequisites for China to take a more active role as the host and primary mediator for the establishment of the Six-Party Talks.

The United States also showed a preference for pursuing a

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<sup>19</sup>Yong Deng and Thomas Moore, "China Views Globalization: Toward a New Great-Power Politics?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2004, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 117-136.

multilateral approach to the second North Korean nuclear crisis, setting aside unilateral and bilateral approaches as impractical at an early stage. Early in the crisis, it became apparent that the United States had no option for unilateral action through military means, and one lesson of the Agreed Framework was arguably that a US-DPRK bilateral approach by itself was also likely to fail. Senior officials within the administration saw the underdevelopment of regional mechanisms for dealing with these issues as part of the problem, and consciously attempted to build in such mechanism in early 2003 as part of their strategy for dealing with the second North Korean nuclear crisis.<sup>20</sup> So President Bush cast the second crisis as a “regional issue,” and eventually the six-party process was established, with China taking the lead role as host and mediator for the process.<sup>21</sup> All the regional stakeholders are represented in this forum, but the dialogue itself did not make much progress in the initial rounds due to a combination of US reluctance to engage with North Korea and North Korea’s continued focus on the United States.

By early 2005, following three rounds of sporadic negotiations, many critics thought the Six-Party Talks were dead, while others asked whether the parties themselves would ever be able to agree on the conditions under which it was possible to say that all diplomatic options had been exhausted.<sup>22</sup> In May of 2005, Secretary of State Rice stopped describing the DPRK as an “outpost of tyranny” and acknowledged the fact that the DPRK is a sovereign state.”<sup>23</sup> Within weeks, newly-appointed Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill met bilaterally in Beijing with his counterpart DPRK Vice Minister

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<sup>20</sup> Presentation by Michael Green, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, May 15, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Press conference with President George W. Bush, March 6, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “Re-Envisioning Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 1, January /February 2005, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks with Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon,” March 20, 2005.

Kim Kye-gwan to announce the resumption of Six-Party Talks after a delay of over one year, signaling a US willingness to negotiate with the DPRK bilaterally in the context of the six-party process. Following intensive negotiations over the course of two sessions in July-August and September of 2005, all parties agreed to a September 19<sup>th</sup> Joint Statement of Principles for addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis.

The statement itself was vague and underwhelming. The document contained few concrete measures, only pledges that the various sides would move forward on the basis of “words for words” and “actions for actions.” But the Joint Statement did signify that for the first time, the regional stakeholders had identified and articulated the minimum common rhetorical objectives that through joint action and implementation might in the future bind the parties together as a “security community.” The common objectives identified were the the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, normalization of relations among all the regional stakeholders, economic development (focused on North Korea), and peace on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. The rhetorical shared objectives that might constitute a Northeast Asian “security community” had been identified, but it was not yet clear that the parties were willing to take concrete actions in pursuit of those objectives. In retrospect, the Joint Statement marked the inauguration of a commitment to collective action in the service of these four common objectives, but circumstances related to the Banco Delta Asia issue prevented this rhetoric from being translated into action.

### **North Korean Nuclear Test: Catalyst for Moving from Rhetorical Consensus to Collective Action?**

The North Korean missile and nuclear tests in July and October of 2006 represented a direct challenge by North Korea to the rhetorical

consensus embodied in the Joint Statement. The tests catalyzed joint action among all the parties, utilizing coercion both multilaterally (UN Security Council Resolutions 1695 and 1718) and bilaterally (Chinese and ROK withholding of benefits promised to DPRK) in response to the DPRK challenge. The DPRK's nuclear test had been tactically successful in that it drew all parties back to the negotiation table, but a strategic failure to the extent that the other parties saw the DPRK test as having flouted shared interests in peace and prosperity that had been articulated in the Joint Statement. Only in the aftermath of the tests did the Joint Statement take on added significance as the basis for pursuing North Korea's denuclearization through the mobilization of a variety of forms of collective action in both bilateral and multilateral forms in the service of the common objective of maintaining regional stability—presumably through the eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

The North Korean nuclear test proved to be a clarifying event and an immediate catalyst for needed tactical adjustments to policy in Washington, Beijing, and to a lesser degree, in Seoul. First, North Korea's nuclear test proved that two decades of US efforts to deny North Korea a nuclear weapons program had failed. The clarity of the failure required adjustments in US policy, if for no other reason than that a policy geared to prevent North Korea from testing nuclear weapons was no longer applicable in a context in which a weapons test had already occurred. President Bush clearly warned of the dangers of proliferation and the certainty of retaliation if such proliferation were to put US national security interests at risk. But the test also posed a tremendous challenge for the Bush administration, since no state that has tested has ever voluntarily given up its nuclear weapons. Given the enormity and unprecedented nature of the challenge, the task of challenging the six parties to undergird their rhetoric with collective action remained as the only viable action available to the administration in the immediate aftermath of North Korea's nuclear test. A more

passive action risked acquiescence to North Korea's challenge and pursuit of the "Pakistan model" of gaining de facto acceptance as a nuclear weapons state, while a more active approach risked escalation that the administration could ill-afford to pursue unilaterally in view of other commitments in the region. Enhanced promotion of cooperation/collective actions with other parties in the region was the only option available to the Bush administration.

A second shift caused by North Korea's nuclear test concerns Chinese policy interests. China's willingness to utilize UN instruments to condemn North Korea in the aftermath of the North's missile and nuclear tests was unprecedented, but these actions did not signal that China was willing to promote or instigate political instability in North Korea. Nonetheless, the North had taken actions that directly impinged on Chinese security interests, primarily in the form of catalyzing further insecurity in Japan (and therefore a more rapid augmentation of Japanese military capabilities in response to the escalation of the threat from North Korea). China needed to find ways to restore its influence with North Korea while avoiding promotion of instability in the North. Rather than using economic sanctions or cutting off North Korea's energy or food lifelines, the Chinese took their own bilateral financial measures to freeze financial transactions with North Korea and withheld bilateral economic cooperation with the North. At the same time, the Chinese sought to restore top-level dialogue with Kim Jong Il that had been cut following the missile test. Special Envoy Tang Jiaxuan visited Washington, Moscow, and Pyongyang immediately following North Korea's nuclear test, and China was able to bring North Korea and the United States back to the dialogue table within three weeks of North Korea's nuclear test. The US interest in cooperation with China required a willingness to show that Washington was doing all it could to work with the North in return for China's unprecedented willingness to join multilateral and bilateral measures designed to bring North Korea back into line.

North Korea's nuclear test appears to have had a lesser impact on South Korean policy than either that of the United States or China, but South Korea has taken clear actions to subordinate inter-Korean cooperation to the objectives of the Six-Party Talks, including withholding of rice (but not fertilizer) assistance to North Korea unless the North adheres to its commitments under the February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement. For instance, the resumption of inter-Korean ministerial talks occurred immediately after the conclusion of the February 13<sup>th</sup> implementing agreement, and South Korea has continued to raise North Korea's need to fulfill its obligations in order to improve the atmosphere for inter-Korean progress. A major test will be whether or not South Korea will continue to place the commonly held objectives of the Six-Party Talks as its highest priority, even over the desire to enhance inter-Korean relations.

The test also drove a division among US policy makers between the objectives of non-proliferation (state-based restraints on spread of technology) and counter-proliferation (more aggressive international efforts to prevent transfer of materials such as interdiction, etc.) factions within the US government. Such divisions came into relief most clearly in the context of questions about the implications of aggressive efforts to promote regime change in North Korea that might actually facilitate proliferation by causing the loss of assured command and control of weapons in the hands of a state actor.

The February 13<sup>th</sup> agreement came about in the context of North Korea's isolation and a lack of North Korean alternatives as a result of regional compellence toward North Korea as much as the offering of benefits through the agreement. For the first time, in the wake of North Korea's nuclear test, all the parties were willing to recognize their common strategic interest in maintaining a non-nuclear Korean peninsula and to subordinate lesser (bilateral) interests to a common shared objective. The extent to which the shared objective of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula can be achieved in the long

run will depend on whether or not all parties hold firm to policies that place the collective interest in denuclearization, normalization, economic development, and peace above perceived bilateral strategic interests vis-à-vis other parties in the region.

However, it remains to be seen whether that unity of purpose among the five parties can be sustained in action in light of their differing priorities. For such unity of purpose to be sustained, it will require that China and South Korea continue to subordinate their bilateral ties with North Korea to the common objective of North Korea's denuclearization, while it will require that the United States and Japan subordinate their respective antipathies to North Korea to the common will to improve bilateral relations with Pyongyang, including through offering of political and economic incentives that are referenced in the Joint Statement. The effectiveness of a "collective security" mechanism in Northeast Asia, as embodied through actions taken through the Six-Party Talks, will depend on whether or not all the parties are willing to hold to a shared strategic purpose and willingness to subordinate their own strategic objectives to practical steps necessary to achieve the commonly identified objectives of the Joint Statement of principles.

North Korea's nuclear test has been the only issue in the region thus far that is big enough to achieve such a purpose. It is unlikely that lesser issues of functional cooperation will have the same kind of transformative impact on regional political relations as cooperation in the context of Six-Party Talks. In order to understand the contributions of the Six-Party Talks to the establishment of a regional security mechanism—as foreshadowed in the February 13, 2007, Agreement on Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement—is to view this objective in the context of almost two decades of incomplete, ad hoc efforts to establish multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. The six-party talks represent the best opportunity to date for creating the conditions under which a meaningful and

lasting multilateral security mechanism with capabilities to take collective action in response to emerging security threats might be established; on the other hand, if the Six-Party Talks ultimately fail to reach this objective, there is likely to be a subsequent crisis, perhaps on an even larger scale than that of a North Korean nuclear test, that will once again reveal the need for collective action. Although certain forms of collective actions are also being mobilized on an ad hoc basis in response to non-traditional security issues such as environmental degradation, there are not yet sufficient positive indications that meaningful collective actions to address strategically sensitive security issues in Northeast Asia can be achieved in the absence of yet another crisis as a catalyst for mobilizing such cooperation.