

## **2008's Final Attempt at a Six Party Solution**

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Eyes and ears were on Beijing earlier this month, as the chief negotiators from China, North Korea, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the United States met in Beijing for a round of the Six Party Talks. The agenda of the meeting was aimed at solidifying a protocol to verify North Korea's nuclear program declarations, determining a timetable for disablement of its nuclear facilities, and setting a schedule for the delivery of the remaining promised energy aid to the impoverished country. After extending a day, the meeting failed to produce a single six-party agreement, and the parties were forced to return home without aid or a verification understanding in hand—perhaps none more disappointed than Assistant Secretary Christopher Hill, the Bush administration's chief envoy to the talks.

### **Events Leading up to the Talks**

2008 was an eventful year leading up to the December 8 - 11 talks, full of controversial ambition on the part of the United States and symbolic steps forward by North Korea (followed by their inevitable hostile steps backward). In June, Pyongyang submitted an inventory of “all” of its past nuclear activities and dramatically destroyed its cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear facility. This prompted President Bush to declare his intention to remove North Korea from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list—a political gesture highly coveted by the North but hotly contested by U.S. conservatives and the Japanese who had earlier succeeded in conditioning the resolution of the North's abduction of Japanese citizens on its removal from the list. Progress amongst the six nations then slowed and even reversed in the case of the two Koreas, and there were signs that North Korea was planning to restart Yongbyon or even conduct a nuclear test. So, in early October, Ambassador Hill made a trip to Pyongyang to ward off further crisis. Following the meeting, the United States removed North Korea from the terrorism blacklist, claiming that the North had agreed to a verification protocol that included the use of “scientific procedures, including sampling and forensic activities” and citing no legal reason to keep them on the list—effectively ignoring its earlier pact with Japan.

While U.S officials claimed North Korea had agreed to allow experts to take samples and conduct forensic tests at all of its declared nuclear facilities and undeclared sites, North Korea said it agreed only to let nuclear inspectors visit its main complex in Yongbyon, view related documents, and interview scientists—not take samples. Thus, the issue of clearly defining a verification protocol that the United States and North Korea, let alone all six parties, could agree to became the formidable challenge and subject of much criticism, leading to the push for the December talks. Talks overall have taken place intermittently since 2003 but have often become bogged down by events including the United States' imposition of sanctions against Banco Delta Asia in 2005 and North Korea's 2006 underground nuclear test. February 2007 yielded a disarmament-for-aid pact among the six nations, but progress stalled this last August due to the current verification standoff, and significant pressure was placed on the talks to ward off further deterioration during the final throes of the Bush administration.

### **December 8-11: Show Time**

Although the agenda for the meeting had three goals, it was clear from the beginning that putting verification methods in a six-way written agreement was the top priority—that is, for everyone

but North Korea, which insisted on prioritizing its receipt of a set timetable for the delivery of the remaining 450,000 tons of heavy oil or equivalent aid earlier promised. While the parties urged North Korea to recognize that the two issues are inescapably linked under the disarmament-for-aid agreement, they did begin with North Korea's top agenda item.

After the first day of the talks on Monday, a consensus was reportedly reached among the six parties to ship all the promised economic aid to North Korea by the end of March 2009, providing a potential end to what has become a major sticking point in the negotiations. While Japan continued to refuse to send any aid, saying Pyongyang must first address the kidnappings of its citizens, a consortium of other countries, including Australia, would be targeted to make up for Japan's share.

China then issued a draft agreement to the other five parties Tuesday on ways to inspect North Korea's nuclear facilities as senior envoys began their second day of talks. Nuclear envoys then spent the day discussing how to break the verification deadlock beginning with North Korea's refusal to let outside inspectors take samples. While the contents of the draft agreement remain undisclosed, it reportedly addressed whether sampling from the North's nuclear sites would be allowed and/or demanded prior to the next stage in the denuclearization process. One compromise that was said to be considered was to reach a broad and purposefully vague deal in a main document and put a sampling-related agreement in a secondary paper that would not be made public.

However, even after extending the talks to include a fourth day, agreement could not be reached. The highly-publicized event ended in an impasse after North Korea continued to refuse to agree to a system of verification in writing that satisfied the United States and its allies. Refusing to allow the removal of soil and air samples from the nuclear facilities to be sent overseas for testing, the North left little room for hope that a Bush administration breakthrough could still occur.

### **Aftermath**

Following the failure of the talks, a defeated Christopher Hill admitted his disappointment while issuing assurances that it did not mean "the end of the world" and "that it just means we have to keep at it." The White House later announced it would reconsider some of the assistance it had agreed to provide in light of North Korea's non-cooperation. Talk of still being able to achieve some sort of agreement before Bush's last day in office continued.

On December 13, however, North Korea threatened to slow disablement of its main nuclear plant after Washington said energy aid to the state had, in fact, been suspended. According to announcements made by the U.S. State Department, all five countries negotiating with North Korea were in agreement that future fuel shipments would not go forward until there was progress on a verification protocol with Pyongyang. However, Washington's negotiating partners did not express the same sentiments of solidarity. "The U.S. State Department's recent statement ... surprised us," deputy foreign minister and Russia's envoy to the talks Alexei Borodavkin told a Russian news agency. He said the Russian delegation "had not agreed upon any joint arrangements with the United States about a delay or suspension of fuel oil shipments to North Korea..." China similarly denied the claim that it had agreed to withhold aid, while

South Korea remained indecisive as to whether it would wait on fuel aid shipments, citing the need for patience and hope.

North Korea's nuclear envoy Kim Kye-gwan, likely expecting such a reaction, had warned reporters prior to leaving Beijing that Pyongyang would "probably adjust the pace of disablement at nuclear facilities if (the aid) is suspended." 2008 ended with the Six Party Talks suspended in these threats—uncertainty remaining over who was willing to withhold their aid—even after Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice reaffirmed that the United States and South Korea, as well as the other three parties, agree on how to pressure North Korea to make commitments on inspections of its nuclear program and are "absolutely" on the same page. However, it should be noted that the United States has already delivered all of its committed energy assistance, thus making the U.S. threatened halt a moot point.

### **Parting Words**

On December 15, President Bush addressed the failed talks aboard Air Force One saying that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il was "trying to test the process." He reminded reporters that this was not the first time Kim had tried to do so, and that the overall objective "is to keep our partners firm with the understanding that the six-party process is the best way to solve the North Korean issue."

For her part, Condoleeza Rice explained the breakdown of the talks afterwards to a Washington audience saying that the North had refused to write down what it had agreed to verbally and that this was typical of the way North Korea negotiates "in ups and downs." She stressed the need to stick it out and continue to negotiate the verification protocol, arguing there was still a chance to persuade Pyongyang to hold up its end of the process—a process that "still has a lot of life in it." She also, through humor, commented on the frustrations involved in negotiating with the North. "Nobody was trusting of the North Koreans. I mean, who trusts the North Koreans? You'd have to be an idiot to trust the North Koreans."

With chances dimming of a breakthrough during the final hours of his administration, President Bush surrendered to the future: "The key is to be firm and patient with a structure that will enable the next president or the next president after that to be able to solve the problem diplomatically."

A New Year's resolution for both 2009 and 2017?