



# FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE SIX-PARTY TALKS

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*The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents last year increased tensions on the Korean Peninsula and created a new “Cold War-type” situation in Northeast Asia. China has launched a proposal in three phases in order to resume the Six-Party Talks, starting with bilateral meetings. Bilateral talks between ROK and DPRK as well as between DPRK and the U.S. have taken place. The third step is multilateral meetings, but the question remains how the countries participating in the Six-Party Talks can reach this phase? Is there a need for parallel or supplementary dialogue mechanisms?*

The sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* and the attacks on *Yeonpyeong* last year, and the reactions of key regional actors, heightened tensions not only on the Korean Peninsula, but in the Northeast Asia region as a whole. After these incidents a new “Cold War-type” situation has emerged in the region. This has been demonstrated by the increase of military exercises and arms race involving South Korea and Japan, as well as China, Russia and North Korea.

Some positive steps to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been seen. The first two stages of a three-phase proposal launched by China to restart the Six-Party Talks have nominally been achieved. Bilateral talks between North and South Korea took place in July and September and were followed by talks between the United States and North Korea at the end of July and October. These meetings resulted in expectations that the third phase would also be completed, i.e. holding the Six-Party Talks. However, it is too early to be optimistic that the third and final stage will be reached in the near future. Some significant political obstacles to bring all parties back to the negotiation table apparently remain.

## The On and Off Process of the Six-Party Talks

The Six-Party Talks collapsed in April 2009 when Pyongyang declared its permanent withdrawal from the process, angered by the imposition of UN sanctions. Despite efforts by the six parties since 2003 to make Pyongyang abandon its nuclear program, the talks have often faced deadlocks due to the

different underlying interests of the participating countries and the fact that North Korea has been unwilling to alter its position on the nuclear issue. There are mainly two reasons for this:

Firstly, each member country has often different views and goals trying to gain benefits from the negotiation process. The U.S., Japan and South Korea have pushed North Korea to dismantle all of its nuclear weapons and materials first. However, Pyongyang has insisted that aid and security are preconditions for dismantlement. China has focused on maintaining its leadership and maximizing its leverage as de-facto mediator in the Six-Party Talks.

Secondly, there is a need to realize that the past cooperative framework has changed to a new competitive landscape among the member states. Neither China nor Russia will go along with the U.S., South Korean and Japanese pressures on North Korea. China is more concerned about instability in North Korea than the country’s nuclear weapons.

At the moment it is therefore important to create momentum towards a resolution of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula and a positive environment for an eventual breakthrough and resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

## Different Views on the Future Talks

North Korea has recently proposed to return to the Six-Party Talks without preconditions and it is likely that China will follow North Korea. In the meantime, South Korea, the U.S. and Japan have expressed some skepticism about the usefulness of the Six-Party Talks, mainly because they



are not convinced that North Korea is ultimately serious about denuclearizing.

Furthermore, there is the reality of the effect of domestic politics, including the upcoming elections in the South and in the U.S., as well as the North Korean power transition of 2012. Realistically, not much can be done until the 2012 elections in South Korea and the U.S. are complete. However, the direction of future processes can be set for post-2012 negotiations. Pyongyang seems to be very eager to push for the Six-Party Talks, as North Korea is willing to solve its domestic problems, such as food shortage and economic crisis before completing its leadership transition of 2012. Meanwhile, the U.S., South Korea and Japan are preoccupied with domestic issues. At the same time, South Korea and the U.S. have a political problem in resuming the Six-Party Talks after the *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong* incidents.

China often views the situation in North Korea more optimistically than the international community. It attempts to play a more active role in providing the venue and framework for resuming the negotiations, including providing a good atmosphere and environment for the Six-Party Talks.

The reality is however that the relations between South and North Korea are the key for reaching the next step, moving forward the Six-Party Talks. One thing that could be observed during the recent bilateral talks was South Korea's willingness to listen to North Korea's views without demanding apologies for the issues of *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong*. The fact that North Korea would sit down and discuss with the South Koreans is also a sign of positive change of its behavior. If Pyongyang expresses its further sincerity in pursuing peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, the Six-Party Talks can be resumed in a year or so, after one or two more rounds of parallel bilateral talks with South Korea and the U.S.

## Are the Six-Party Talks the Best Option for Regional Security?

Even if the Six-Party Talks were resumed any time soon, it does not mean that all issues can be solved within the framework of negotiations. The key is how to avoid making the same mistakes as in past negotiation rounds. There is a need for a win-win approach to meet common interests among the Six-Party members.

There has been an increasing request for and discussion about alternative or parallel security mechanisms to the Six-Party Talks. Since the North Korean nuclear issue is not the only source of instability in Northeast Asia, future negotiation could include a wider range of security matters, such as economic, environmental, terrorism and energy issues. Such a security mechanism could possibly take its inspiration from post-Cold War Europe. One way would be to use OSCE's various approaches to confidence and security-building, peacekeeping, crisis prevention and management and talks and negotiations.

The mechanism should enable the parties to meet more often and on a regular basis. Mutual trust and confidence could be built by initiating negotiations dealing with areas of common interest, where there already is some degree of consensus, such as energy, terrorism and transportation security issues.

It seems to be a long road to reach this goal. However, the Six-Party Talks could be a starting point for paving the way towards a regional security mechanism that will further the peaceful development in Northeast Asia.

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