



U.S.–DPRK BILATERAL TALKS

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The United States and North Korea resumed talks in Beijing on February 23–24, 2012, after a delay following the death of Kim Jong Il two months ago. Present at the talks were a delegation of the DPRK headed by First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan and a delegation of the U.S. headed by Ambassador Glyn Davies, the Special Representative for North Korea Policy of the State Department. Envoys from North Korea and the U.S. explored the steps needed to resume the Six-Party Talks on ending the North's nuclear weapons program.

Leap Day Deal

On February 29 agreements were simultaneously released by the U.S. and North Korea. Under the agreements, Pyongyang will, after a three-year absence, allow the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) inspectors back into the country to monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment and confirm disablement of the North Korean nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. Pyongyang agreed to a close monitoring of the 240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance offered by the U.S. that will be distributed by international aid agencies, so that the U.S. could track the delivery of food to women and children, rather than distribution by the military. The agreements also concerned not only the nuclear and aid issues but also direct population-to-population exchanges, including in the areas of culture, education, and sports.

The agreements show that North Korea's new leader Kim Jong Un has the political will to resolve the nuclear issue with the U.S. through a peaceful dialogue. Nevertheless, according to the U.S., there is still a "long way" to go before the Six-Party Talks can resume. Even if they are resumed, it is unclear whether the talks can fully stop North Korea's nuclear ambition.

A Need for Talks

There are several reasons for Kim Jong Un to engage in a bilateral dialogue with the U.S. This year is a critical time for Pyongyang as North Korea will in April celebrate the long anticipated centenary of the country's founder Kim Il

Sung's birth. For many years it has been understood that the regime would announce in 2012 the success of the country as strong and prosperous, to coincide with the centenary celebrations. In such a landmark year, it comes as somewhat of an embarrassment for the new leader that the country is in dire need of food aid. Kim Jong Un is now under internal pressure to show his capacity for dealing with food crises. As a result, food aid from the US is an efficient way to solve the problem of food shortages, thereby maintaining stability within the country.

North Korea is pursuing a strategy of dialogue with the U.S. in distinct contrast to its shunning of South Korea. Pyongyang has rejected Seoul's offers of dialogue in recent weeks; animosity between the two Koreas still lingers. A presidential election is scheduled for later this year in South Korea and it seems that Pyongyang is not interested in dialogue with, what it perceives as, the "lame-duck" and anti-North Korean president, Lee Myung-bak. Instead Pyongyang will wait until after a new South Korean government has taken office to resume talks. Kim Jong Un is attempting to improve ties with the U.S., following the guidance for such left by his father Kim Jong Il. The late Kim regarded the U.S. as the greatest threat to the security of the North and, therefore, considered not South Korea but the U.S. the most important negotiation partner for North Korea.

China is North Korea's main economic donor and by far the most influential power in Pyongyang. However, North Korea views China primarily as leverage in dialogue with the U.S. Kim Jong Un has reminded Beijing that Pyongyang does have other options, such as direct talks with the U.S.



No More Strategic Patience

Obama's approach to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue has switched from a policy of "strategic patience" to that of a policy of engagement. There are several reasons for this. The Obama administration has its own headaches in the Iranian nuclear issue – a dispute that is currently grid-locked. With the U.S. election looming, President Obama wants to be able to show some achievements in his foreign relations portfolio, and in particular with the North Korean nuclear issue. The February 29 agreements are the first positive development in U.S. dialogue with North Korea since Obama took office.

Obama has tried to enhance U.S. political leverage over North Korea, previously the U.S. has relied on China's influence over Pyongyang. It may well be a part of a U.S. strategy for dealing with China, aimed at undermining the influence of China over the country. China is more concerned about stability on the Korean Peninsula than in dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons. However, China tacitly supported U.S. direct talks with North Korea with the goal of dismantling Pyongyang's nuclear program.

The U.S.–DPRK talks were also part of the wider engagement process to resume the Six-Party Talks. The talks were based on the "three-stage plan" proposed by China in January 2011. China launched the idea that talks should start with inter-Korean talks, followed by U.S.–DPRK talks, followed by resumption of the Six-Party Talks. However, even if the Six-Party Talks will be resumed, the U.S.–DPRK talks will be continued and the U.S. will discuss the key issues with North Korea within the framework of bilateral talks.

Implications of the U.S. Election

Although the talks between the U.S. and North Korea were an important starting point for bringing about a break-

through on the North Korean nuclear issue, the situation could change if Obama loses the 2012 presidential election. Toward the end of the Clinton administration, in October of 2000, First Deputy Chairman of North Korea Jo Myong Rok and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright exchanged visits to discuss the prospects for concluding a peace treaty between the two countries. The momentum was thwarted, however, with the inauguration of U.S. President George W. Bush, who castigated North Korea as a member of the "Axis of Evil." After a couple of years, Bush modified his stance and started negotiating like Bill Clinton had done previously. However, Bush's presidency ended without a resolution to the impasse. After four years of a policy of "strategic patience" toward North Korea, Obama has set down a new approach to deal with the North Korean nuclear problem as we have seen in the recent U.S.–DPRK bilateral talks.

However, there is a familiar question mark hanging over the post-election policy of the U.S. The leading candidate of the Republican Party in the U.S., Mitt Romney, has criticized the Obama administration for weakness in its foreign policy toward Iran and North Korea. If Obama fails in his bid for re-election, Kim Jong Un may very well experience a similar volte-face from the U.S. as his late father did a decade ago.

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