

## CONFERENCE REPORT



### THE NEXT PHASE OF U.S.-DPRK RELATIONS

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#### A CONFERENCE ORGANIZED BY THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (NCAFP)

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On November 7, 2008, the NCAFP hosted a delegation from North Korea (DPRK) to discuss the next phase of U.S.-DPRK relations. The meeting came a few days after the U.S. presidential elections. The DPRK delegation was led by Ambassador Ri Gun, Director-General of the Department of U.S. Affairs in the DPRK Foreign Ministry. Among the Americans present were: Ambassador Sung Kim, Special Envoy for the Six Party Talks, Department of State; former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger; five former U.S. ambassadors; and two staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The NCAFP has been hosting informal Track II meetings with the North Koreans since 2003 and several DPRK participants and U.S. officials have said they found such meetings very useful.

#### OVERVIEW

The North Koreans were relatively conciliatory and in a “wait and see” mood. They did not reveal any changes, nuanced or otherwise, in their basic position. Their complaints were all about how the Bush Administration had, in their view, wasted the first five to six years of its term in office. There were few if any North Korean complaints about the past two years of intensive negotiations between the two sides. And both sides seemed to agree that the January 2007 Berlin meeting between Assistant Secretary Chris Hill and DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye Gwan had marked a turning point.

Several Americans warned the North Koreans about the dangers of indefinite procrastination in the denuclearization process. Such procrastination would have the effect of de-legitimizing the negotiations and would drain U.S. domestic support.

Both sides were concerned about the delicate transition process that is now underway during the next several months as America moves from a Bush to an Obama

Administration. The North Koreans wanted to be reassured that there would be continuity of U.S. policy. Several Americans suggested that there should be informal contacts between Obama and the DPRK during the next three months. But all agreed that the U.S. has only one president at a time and that it was necessary to continue to make progress in the remaining months of the Bush Administration in order to maintain momentum.

## **PRESENT STATE OF NEGOTIATIONS**

A U.S. participant summarized the present state of negotiations by saying that the two sides (the U.S. and the DPRK) had made significant progress on the second phase of disabling North Korea's nuclear program but that a lot of work remains. The U.S., he said, is eager to get to the third stage of dismantlement which would include not just dismantlement but removal of nuclear weapons from North Korea along with the normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations.

There were, however, many challenges in this process. One of the important challenges, said the American, is that this is a multilateral process which involves not only the U.S. but other parties as well. He stressed that it was in North Korea's interest to improve relations with all of its neighbors.

The combination of multilateral and bilateral negotiations had worked well since the important Berlin meeting in January 2007 between Assistant Secretary Chris Hill and DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye Gwan, said the American. And for the next three months before President-elect Obama assumes the presidency, it would be critical to maintain momentum.

A North Korean participant agreed with this assessment that the 2007 direct talks in Berlin had proved to be a turning point. He said that negotiations had moved swiftly after that. The Banco Delta issue was resolved; North Korea's nuclear reactor was shut down; and the disablement process had begun and was now 90% complete. He said that Pyongyang would work hard with the Bush Administration over the next three months to make progress and it hoped that under the new U.S. administration the talks would gain momentum. The continuity of policy under the next U.S. administration would be very important.

## **THE ISSUE NOW**

One U.S. participant defined the issue in this manner. For the U.S., the central issue is non-proliferation. If nuclear weapons continue to proliferate, sooner or later they will be used. Therefore there is a strong consensus in the U.S. which goes well beyond the North Korean issue to stop nuclear proliferation. The problem for North Korea, said the American, is not the general issue of proliferation but how to maintain its own security. So it is inevitable that North Korea will want to see steps taken that will enhance its own security in return for giving up nuclear weapons. This is not an unreasonable demand,

said the American, even if the U.S. disapproves of particular formulations of this demand. Both sides should seek to define more clearly the end result they seek. This would make it more feasible to navigate the various stages needed to get there.

## **NORTH KOREA'S CHOICES**

A U.S. participant said that North Korea has two choices. It can move towards genuine and final denuclearization or it can procrastinate indefinitely. The danger of North Korea taking the latter course is that the negotiating process will become so controversial in Washington that it will become politically untenable and negotiations will lose their legitimacy.

Another U.S. participant agreed with this assessment and he said that it was necessary to find a road map to complete disarmament while at the same time satisfying North Korean security concerns. The question is: what, if anything, can satisfy those concerns? What is North Korea looking for at this point?

Several North Koreans indicated that the answer to this question was normalization of relations with the U.S. One DPRK representative reiterated a longstanding DPRK position that North Korea cannot unilaterally abandon nuclear weapons but that if confidence was established with the U.S., if relations were normalized and if North Korea felt no nuclear threat from the U.S. there would then be no need for even a single nuclear weapon.

Another North Korean participant reiterated this general position by saying that the process of normalization of relations will help denuclearization. Another North Korean participant stressed the importance of continuity in the next Administration. We waited through the first six years of the Bush Administration before it began to negotiate with North Korea and we don't want to wait another six years. That, he said, is why we watch carefully every word that Obama says on this issue.