

Will North Korea return to the six party talks?

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Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's recent visit to celebrate the 60th anniversary of PRC-DPRK diplomatic relations North Korea, and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's subsequent pledge to return to multiparty talks if they are preceded by bilateral talks with the U.S. has dominated headlines this week.

Yet while the prospects for multilateral negotiations is a welcome development, it is also likely to be a long time before any serious negotiations begin. Indeed, there were a number of interesting conclusions that can be drawn from this week's meeting between the two allies.

First, despite increasing speculation over the months that China has grown frustrated with North Korean actions, Wen's visit and the effusive rhetoric from both sides is ample evidence that China has no intention of abandoning North Korea, or putting sizable pressure on the North to modify its ways. China continues to see North Korean collapse as a greater threat than North Korean militancy; and while China desires denuclearization in the region and that North Korea would follow the Chinese model of economic reform, it is still pursuing those goals quietly and without ample pressure.

Second, the likelihood that North Korea will truly enter into negotiations about its nuclear program remains slim. Some observers have suggested that Kim's willingness to talk now is a result of the pain of the economic sanctions imposed on North Korea by UN resolution 1874. Those UN sanctions came about in response to the North's nuclear and missile tests earlier this year, and have targeted North Korean exports, proliferation of military technology, and luxury goods.

Yet we should be cautious about concluding that sanctions have worked to bring North Korea back to the table. The North Korean leadership has endured far worse economic isolation from the world in the past, and the regime is clearly prepared to endure sanctions today. In fact, all summer long the North has been hinting that it might be willing to come back to the table precisely because it has proven to the world that it has a nuclear capability.

Furthermore, the key part of Kim Jong-il's announcement was his explicit condition that bilateral talks with the U.S. must precede any multilateral negotiations. This is something the U.S. is highly unlikely to agree to do. In fact, the Obama

administration has long claimed that bilateral negotiations will only occur in the context of multilateral negotiations, and that the U.S. will not abandon its own allies (South Korea and Japan). Furthermore, my own belief is that North Korea hopes to use the bilateral talks precisely to remove the sanctions. That is, North Korea has claimed that removal of the sanctions must precede any realistic discussion of denuclearization on the Korean peninsula, and Kim's willingness to talk is most likely really a way of saying that "if sanctions are removed" the North is willing to talk. This also is exactly the opposite of what the U.S., South Korea, and Japan expect: their policy is that after North Korea denuclearizes, the sanctions will be removed.

Thus, once again we are in a position with North Korea where both sides may agree on the ultimate goals, and both sides may even agree on the solution to those goals. But once again, the key question will be "who goes first?". Both the U.S. and North Korea have long agreed that the essence of the problem is North Korean nuclear weapons on the one hand, and U.S. "hostile pressure" on the other. The U.S. has consistently offered to normalize relations with North Korea once it denuclearizes; the North consistently responds that it is more than willing to denuclearize after the U.S. normalizes relations with it. Both sides distrust each other intensely, and both sides expect the other to renege on any agreement its makes. Hence, stalemate. This latest set of negotiations and sanctions could be a subset of this overall dynamic, and most likely will have the same result.

While even opening the nuclear negotiations is a positive step, it also appears that there is very little potential for actual movement in the negotiations at this time. Furthermore, both sides may be more entrenched in their positions now than ever before; and observers in the U.S. and South Korea increasingly believe that North Korea will never give up its nuclear weapons; and they may be right.

In sum, the Chinese premier's visit to North Korea merely reconfirmed the overall contours of the North Korean nuclear problem, and rather than pointing to any new way forward, merely puts us back in the same position as before.

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