Some signs of hope at Korea talks

By Jing-dong Yuan
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After a 13-month hiatus, the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks finally began last week in Beijing.

Having secured North Korea’s agreement to participate, it is crucial that the process makes progress toward the goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. This requires carefully defining the issue, presenting and explaining clearly positions and demands, setting and focusing priorities and developing a road map for nuclear dismantlement with clearly defined timelines.

While all the parties agree to the ultimate goal of peninsular denuclearization, it is still important to define what "de-nuclearization" means and what it requires. It should be understood that North Korea must not be allowed to have any nuclear weapons programs, whether through plutonium reprocessing or uranium enrichment to derive weapons-grade fissile materials.

But what about civilian nuclear programs? Here defining the issue becomes critical. Based on North Korea’s past behavior, it seems prudent that this would be strongly discouraged, certainly not unless and until Pyongyang accepts stringent international verification and inspection provisions and certainly not before it returns to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty nuclear-free.

Meetings last week began to reveal different positions. North Korea clearly wants to retain its civilian nuclear programs while the United States seeks complete nuclear dismantlement. While the atmosphere has been positive, the two sides are butting heads on this one. Clearly, the issue of definition is far from over and is never as easy as it appears.

The second element essential for this round of talks would be for North Korea and the United States to present in unequivocal terms their respective positions and demands. What are each side’s concerns, how can they be addressed and under what conditions? Can they agree to an end-game (e.g., nuclear dismantlement plus security guarantees for North Korea)? It also is important that both sides explain their positions and dispel some misunderstandings (or even deliberate distortions). For instance, the United States needs to demonstrate that it respects North Korea as a sovereign country and is not intent on pursuing regime change; Pyongyang, on the other hand, should demonstrate its willingness to accept international inspections to dispel concerns over potential future violations.
Again, discussions so far have shown differences in sequencing. Should North Korea disarm first? Or should the United States remove what Pyongyang considers threats, including the so-called nuclear umbrella? Or some kind of combination that pits "words for words" and "actions for actions," aligning nuclear freeze and dismantlement with provisions for economic aid and energy supplies?

Over the last three rounds of talks, some preliminary proposals have been put forward by various parties. Now it is time to respond to these proposals – a nuclear freeze for economic assistance, CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement), or a combination of the two. The parties should focus on the most important issue – how to resolve the nuclear impasse and not allow the process be hijacked by detracted by other issues such as North Korea’s abductions of Japanese citizens in the past. Nor is it the time to discuss a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice. It is not that such a treaty is unimportant, but such negotiations should come after the resolution of the nuclear issue and indeed could be the natural follow-up to develop long-term peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, the parties should develop and agree to a road map toward nuclear dismantlement. This road map should contain broad political commitments and obligations by all and an agreed procedure on how to accomplish the set goals through specific working mechanisms within a clearly defined timeline. Otherwise, the process would be reduced to useless talk shops for rehashed political propaganda or accusations.

The Beijing meetings provide yet another opportunity to tackle the North Korean nuclear impasse. Now is the time to clearly define the issue, lay down the positions, set and focus the priorities and find ways to achieve real results. The region and the international nuclear nonproliferation regime cannot afford failure and another long hiatus. So far, all the parties have demonstrated their willingness and commitment to discussions, but this is a good sign.

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