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Talks about Talking Okay, but the Ball Is in Pyongyang's Court

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Surprise meetings between North and South Korean nuclear negotiators this weekend and Washington's subsequent invitation to Pyongyang for bilateral talks in New York are significant for their occurrence. However, it is premature to see them as a breakthrough toward achieving North Korean denuclearization. In fact, they are not even negotiations but rather meetings to explore a return to negotiations.

The meetings are consistent with the existing South Korea and U.S. two-track policy of pressure and conditional dialogue with North Korea. Accordingly, in keeping with multiple Obama Administration statements, the U.S. should offer no new inducements to North Korea's denuclearization, let alone sweeteners to simply return to the negotiating table.

The Obama Administration should tread carefully and not undercut key ally South Korea or allow Pyongyang to again evade fulfilling its denuclearization requirements. Washington should insist that resumption of six-party talks is conditional on North Korea first fully addressing South Korean demands arising from Pyongyang's two attacks last year, as well as tangibly resuming nuclear dismantlement. The United States should also make clear that international sanctions will not be rescinded and that multilateral nuclear negotiations must include sufficient verification measures.

Surprise in Bali. South Korean six-party talks negotiator Wi Sung-lac met with his North Korean counterpart Ri Yong-ho on the sidelines of the

ASEAN Regional Forum in Bali, Indonesia, on July 22. Wi described the meeting as "constructive and fruitful," with both Koreas pledging to "make joint efforts to set conditions to resume the six-party talks as soon as possible."

South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan met briefly with North Korean Foreign Minister Park Ui-chun the next day. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced on July 24 that North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan had been invited to meet with U.S. officials in New York. The meetings are expected to occur July 27–28.

In agreeing to the meetings, both Koreas compromised to some degree, perhaps none more so than North Korea, which only last month vowed to have nothing to do with South Korea's Lee Myung-bak administration during the latter's remaining two years in office. Pyongyang's recent revelation of secret inter-Korean talks and embarrassing claims that Seoul pledged secret payments to "buy a summit" were seen as the final nail in the coffin of inter-Korean dialogue.

North Korea's reversal is dramatic, but Pyongyang has previously made tactical concessions in order to achieve strategic objectives. The United States

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and South Korea should remain suspicious that Pyongyang has no intention of actually fulfilling its denuclearization commitments. Vague North Korean promises are not grounds for exuberant optimism.

For its part, Seoul—and by extension, the U.S.—appears to have lowered the bar on previous demands that North Korea first fulfill preconditions prior to resuming dialogue. But U.S. officials continue to insist publicly and privately that they will not return to past failed policies of unconditional engagement. Secretary Clinton sought to lower expectations by describing the bilateral dialogue as merely “an exploratory meeting to determine if North Korea is prepared to affirm its obligations...as well as take concrete and irreversible steps toward denuclearization.” Clinton also emphasized that the United States would not reward North Korea for simply returning to the table or engage in fruitless, protracted negotiations.

Despite these public reassurances, the meetings with North Korea could be just the tip of a policy iceberg. Rumors have been swirling in Washington and Seoul that the Obama Administration was increasingly uncomfortable with the lack of contact with Pyongyang, perceiving it as exacerbating the potential for inter-Korean incidents or even conflict. As a result, Washington was looking to remove obstacles to resuming dialogue with Pyongyang and was willing to pressure Seoul to do the same.

U.S. eagerness to re-engage North Korea may be based on the false premise that doing so will trick Pyongyang into postponing any provocative behavior, including nuclear and missile tests, as long as dialogue drags on. However, North Korea has historically used both provocations and diplomacy, either simultaneously or alternately, to achieve its objectives or force negotiating terms more to its liking. Pyongyang has also conducted provocations in between negotiating rounds.

North Korea may refrain from a tactical military clash with South Korea as long as it continues to seek food aid. U.S. officials privately insist that a food aid decision is not forthcoming, particularly since a visit by U.S. Envoy on North Korea Human Rights Robert King failed to elicit North Korea's

agreement to sufficient monitoring requirements. However, Pyongyang may assess that agreeing to dialogue could improve its potential for receiving humanitarian assistance.

Pyongyang may still proceed with a nuclear or long-range missile test, however, to gain negotiating leverage from a demonstration of its increasing military capability. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned in January that North Korea could be able to deliver a nuclear weapon via intercontinental ballistic missile to the U.S. within five years. Last October, North Korea conducted a rocket engine test at a new missile launch facility that is larger than the existing Taepo Dong installation. South Korean media reported this weekend that North Korea is laying rail lines to the new facility.

Use Bilateral Meetings to Shape Six-Party Talks. It would be premature for the six-party talks to resume in the near-term, since Pyongyang has not faced sufficient pressure to change its recalcitrant behavior. In fact, North Korea may feel it is returning to negotiations in a strengthened position, since there was a feeble military and diplomatic response to its two attacks on South Korea, only sporadic enforcement of international sanctions following its nuclear and missile tests, and no international response to its disclosure of a uranium enrichment facility that violated United Nations resolutions.

Instead, Washington and Seoul should insist on using bilateral meetings with Pyongyang to resolve allied security concerns and properly frame the negotiating agenda prior to agreeing to return to the six-party talks. The Obama and Lee administrations should require North Korea to first take tangible steps, such as having U.N. inspectors return to Yongbyon, resuming dismantling its nuclear facilities, and providing its required complete and accurate data declaration, including information on its uranium-based nuclear weapons program.

The Obama Administration should also make clear to North Korea that international sanctions will remain in place and that any subsequent six-party talks agreement must include a sufficiently rigorous verification program. Finally, Washington should not undermine key ally Seoul by allowing Pyongyang to evade responsibility for its attacks last year.

The Ball Is in Pyongyang's Court. Currently, there is little optimism that negotiations will be successful, since North Korea has repeatedly dashed the hopes of those advocating engagement. To overcome this suspicion in order to allow for a

resumption of six-party talks, the ball is firmly in Pyongyang's court.

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