

Chapter 6

‘The Six-Party Talks Process: Towards an Asian Concert?’

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The Six-Party Talks achieved an important milestone in February 2007—an agreement which required North Korea to freeze its Yongbyon reactor in exchange for some initial energy assistance and discussions on more normalised relations with the United States. North Korea was also required to come clean on all of its nuclear facilities and research by providing a complete and unabridged list.¹ But this important step was to come later rather than right at the outset. This bargain represents an important shift in the US position. Washington had earlier insisted that North Korea really had to relinquish its entire nuclear program before any concessions were granted.

Experience might suggest that North Korea got what it wanted—particularly more time when the Bush Administration was in its lame duck season—and that it has no real intention of undertaking complete nuclear disarmament. If the pessimists (or perhaps the realists) are correct, the Bush Administration took a big risk. The maximum that might be expected from North Korea could consist of the freeze, disablement and possibly removal of North Korea’s facilities for producing additional weapons, but not necessarily the surrender of all elements of the existing arsenal. This suggests a de facto admission that the best that can be hoped for is the management of a reduced problem.

This risks slipping into the perspective that one simply has to learn to live with a minimally nuclear North Korea. Of the six parties, it is possible that China, Russia and South Korea are relatively comfortable with that prospect (and some in Washington may even be willing to do so as well). Perhaps disarmament is simply not a pragmatic option—as long as North Korea acts within reasonable bounds and is not an embarrassment for its neighbours, is some sort of nuclear capability tolerable? But this would still be quite a sacrifice for China. It means giving up on being the only North Asian state with nuclear weapons. Moreover, even a very small yet frozen North Korea nuclear arsenal would prove an all too easy basis on which Japan could justify its missile defence programs, and indeed perhaps take even more adventurous steps. These are not outcomes which China would want to see encouraged.

The Six-Party Talks process will continue to be challenging. Early steps were stalled by painstaking negotiations to release North Korean funds deposited into a Macau-based financial house. Lingering concerns about North Korea's interest in uranium enrichment (as well as its traditional route of plutonium extraction) will haunt future developments. Any list that North Korea produces is unlikely to gain universal confidence. The process has been very demanding on the patience of its main participants. This includes China, which is not only the host of the talks but is also commonly viewed as the country with the greatest leverage over North Korea—a supposed advantage which also encourages unrealistic expectations about what Beijing may be able to get Pyongyang to do. It also includes the United States whose former envoy, Christopher Hill, showed the patience of Job.

Measuring the Six-Party Talks properly

North Korea may be willing to have the vast majority of its production capacities removed for the right price. But giving up all semblance of nuclear weapons status is a different prospect. It remains unlikely that the Six-Party Talks will result in the complete removal of all traces of North Korea's nuclear weapons, but it is not clear that this is the benchmark against which the success of the Talks should be judged. When assessed against more modest objectives for the North Korean situation and wider objectives North Asia, the Six-Party Talks process offers some distinct advantages.

First, the Talks have provided a mechanism short of the use of force for dealing with North Korea. The response to North Korea's nuclear test in late 2006 was not a military attack. It was sustained pressure (including the coercive power of an attack option left on the table and intensive encouragement from China) which led to a resumption of the Six-Party Talks in early 2007 and the February agreement mentioned at the start of this chapter. Like all multilateral processes involving exhaustive discussions which for years can go nowhere, the Six-Party Talks process has had plenty of critics. But few, if any, of its detractors have come up with a better approach to addressing North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The Six-Party Talks is one of those processes (like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in the early 1990s) that would need to be invented if it was not already available. In other words, it is better to judge the efficacy of the Six-Party Talks against the uncertain and incomplete outcomes which non-existent or non-effective alternatives might provide rather than against some absolutist but fantastical goal of complete North Korean nuclear disarmament. In dealing with North Korea, as the author has argued elsewhere, the least ugly option is king.²

Second, through the Six-Party Talks process North Korea has been held in a loose but multilateral embrace of five significant regional powers. Differences certainly remain between them in their positions. Japan is the unhappiest. Its

refusal to provide financial assistance to North Korea until Pyongyang addresses the outstanding abductee issue is rather like asking for a 30-minute start in the Olympic marathon: it simply will not happen. But Japan genuinely feels that a nuclear North Korea—its near neighbour under whose missile shadow it falls—is getting too good a deal.³ This has opened up some tensions between Japan and the United States, which views North Korea as a proliferation risk on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. And China continues to see North Korea as a domestic instability risk across the border. There is no doubt that different motivations are in play here.

Yet, through the Six-Party Talks process, these three largest powers in East Asian security affairs—the United States, China and Japan—have been required to explore and negotiate the differences in their policies towards an urgent regional security issue. Their policy convergence is certainly incomplete. They do not always agree and the Six-Party Talks process may end up with a result that none of them are entirely satisfied with. But they have found enough common interests to remain part of the process despite the difficulty of dealing with North Korea. If the Six-Party Talks can be a modest way of encouraging great power cooperation in Asia, it will have been worth the effort. This means that even if the final impact of the Talks process on the North Korean nuclear weapons program is less than decisive, it may have done something even more important for Asia. What is special about the Six-Party Talks is not that it is focused on the North Korean nuclear situation per se. The Talks process is special because all of the major powers in East Asia are sitting around the table working on an important security issue.⁴

Inclusive and exclusive alternatives

This incipient but focused collaboration between Asia's major powers is rare. This is not to suggest that the Six-Party Talks process is the only forum in the Asia-Pacific that includes 'the big three'. APEC offers the potential for great power get-togethers on its sidelines among the region's leaders, but seems generally more sympathetic to US and Western views than to those of East Asia. It has a very broad membership which means that, while it includes the great powers, it also has to incorporate the small ones whose roles in the Asian power equation are always going to be modest. It is probably not the ideal forum for managing the security challenges of North Asia over the long-term. Its agenda, official or informal, does not seem likely to be easily harnessed or available for direct work on the issues that affect direct relations between the big powers in North Asia. APEC's main security outcomes so far—as a platform for the East Timor intervention in 1999 and more recently in encouraging regional counter-terrorism and counter-pandemic cooperation—are side issues to the great power balance.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is also too inclusive and is hamstrung by its lowest common denominator ethos. Smaller powers, including its hosts, are inclined to advance their interests in being recognised as the official drivers of Asian multilateralism and their own sub-regional preoccupations, ahead of deep and meaningful contact directly between the great powers of North Asia. Some years ago the founding members of ASEAN created something very close to a Southeast Asian security community based on the norm that states in the community should avoid conflict with one another. This stands as a remarkable achievement. But the idea of spreading this sometimes patchy normative framework to the rest of Asia through ASEAN-centred processes looks much better in theory than in practice.

APEC and the ARF are two of the more established regional fora and have been supplemented by new ones. But the newer kids on the block—ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS)—are unlikely to be concerts in the making because both exclude the United States. And, rather than serving as locations for cooperation between their two great power members from East Asia (China and Japan), they have become venues for their competition for influence over the rest of the region. For now, at least, Japan's favourite, the EAS (which includes the balancing presence of Australia, New Zealand and India), is running second to the more important—and ironically more East Asian—APT, which is China's favoured mechanism. This may seem beneficial for China's interests in the short term, but an approach which keeps the United States out and Japan down is not likely to be good for the great power stability in Asia on which China also depends.

An embryonic concert?

By comparison, while the Six-Party Talks process is by no means a perfect arrangement, it may offer the best chance as a bridge to an Asian 'concert of powers'. This concert would not be a permanent, formal, institution.⁵ Instead, it would be a process of great power collaboration which creates such stabilising and convergent expectations that, when major problems arise, the major powers can sit down together and seek to manage their differences. If it is anything like the European concert of the early nineteenth century, an Asian concert would be highly discriminatory. Only the biggest powers would need to apply for membership (in fact they would appoint themselves in a process of self-selection). The interests of the smaller powers (the non-members of the concert) could get overlooked. But if the small and medium powers of the region (like Australia, New Zealand and the ASEAN countries) also depend on stable relations between the great powers for the future of Asian security, and if those stable relations are only really achievable if the great powers can sit down and work out their differences with one another, then some sacrifice of the one-state, one-vote principle may be in order.

Of course, not all the members of the Six-Party Talks process may themselves belong in that concert. Neither South Korea nor North Korea really qualifies as a great power. Six parties minus two leaves four. Russia's hydrocarbon-induced return to bully power status under Vladimir Putin might not have been as deeply established as some feared, and was aimed much more at European than Asian influence. Four parties minus one leaves three. Most certainly the United States and China belong to the concert. After all, it is their relationship that Asia's future security order depends on most of all. Japan's place is a little less certain. It is not a great power in terms of possessing a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in terms of possessing nuclear weapons, or in terms of the constitutional restrictions on the deployment of Japan's military. But Japan needs to be part of the concert simply because China-Japan and US-Japan relations are the other legs of that vital tripod in North Asia. There is also a need, at least eventually, to include a fourth great power in the concert. This is India—Asia's second rising great power. This confirms that, while the Talks may contribute to the Concert, the Concert is not the Six-Party Talks.

A concert of Asia-Pacific powers—which seeks to extend the limited cooperation that has been seen at the Six-Party Talks—might well prove ineffective because of the difference in strategic interests between its members. It would include the three leading relationships of strategic competition in Asia: in the near-term between China and Japan; in the medium-term between China and the United States; and in the long-term between China and India. But even an ineffective great power concert could be preferable to the strengthening of rival and mutually exclusive groupings in Asia which might split the region into conflicting blocs.

A clash of alliances

One of these blocs could emerge as an alliance of maritime democracies under US leadership. The clearest form of this idea has actually been presented by Japan: the Asian democratic quad favoured during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's brief premiership, which would add Australia and India to the mix. This is not to say that all elements of closer cooperation between any of these four powers form a necessary pathway to that quad. But they could do so. The debate over Australia's new security declaration with Japan is a case in point. Championed by Abe and Australia's former Prime Minister, John Howard, the declaration received only cautious support from Howard's political rival Kevin Rudd (now Australian Prime Minister), who warned against any moves to take the relationship down the alliance path.⁶ Likewise Rudd argued that his support for the increasingly close Trilateral Strategic Dialogue between the United States, Japan and Australia did not mean an endorsement of any attempts to encircle China. This is an important point because, for some observers, the emergence of a *de facto* (if not *de jure*) trilateral alliance between the United

States and its two leading alliance partners in Asia—Japan and Australia—may be an idea whose time has come.

Many of the arguments against a full quad of Asian democracies are practical ones. Quite simply, India wishes to retain its foreign policy autonomy. While New Delhi welcomes the chance to enjoy closer security relations with the United States, Japan and Australia, its preference is for a series of bilateral relationships. It wants to stay out of the quad. Australia is also reluctant. But representatives from the four countries did meet together in early 2007 on the sidelines of an ARF meeting in the Philippines, and China revealed its discomfort by sending a diplomatic note of concern to each of the four capitals.⁷

China has access to a potential response to this maritime alliance in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which could be the basis for an alliance of continental autocracies in which Russia also plays a leading role, and to which countries like Iran and North Korea might well be attracted. Large scale 'anti-terrorism' exercises conducted under SCO auspices may well be an early sign of competition with the recent emergence of trilateral and quadrilateral exercises involving the maritime powers in Asia.

There is a small amount of overlap between the groupings. For example, India is an observer of the SCO—a clear sign of its position as a swing state in Asia. Yet, for the most part, the groupings are mutually exclusive. For example, the alliance of democracies would be based on many shared interests and values between its members. But it would, by definition, automatically exclude China.

These two blocs would each be stronger than the more diverse and unwieldy great power concert. The blocs would be more effective in pursuing their own objectives. But they could divide the region so that the Asia of 2014 would look too much like the Europe of 1914 and we all know what happens next. Against this prospect, the Six-Party Talks process carries the hint of a more promising future. Not a perfect Asia where all differences between the great powers are resolved. Not a complete answer to the security problems that the concert would undoubtedly struggle with. But a partially successful alternative to the dangerous two-horse race which could emerge between blocs led by China and the United States.

Conclusion

A great power concert in Asia, however ineffective, is preferable to an Asia dangerously divided between two rival blocs, however internally effective these blocs may be. But for a flawed but still valuable concert to operate, almost all of the participating countries would have to give up something. In other words, in order to win, one would have to lose. Let us look first at the great powers. The United States has to give up the idea that it can maintain primacy in Asia. A great power concert means that the United States will have to share hegemony,

including with China. It will need to soften its emphasis on a network of military alliances with other maritime democracies in the region.

China probably has rather less to lose, but it still has to relinquish something. It will need to abandon any ideas that it will be the single leader of Asia. Unlike the SCO, of which Beijing is the natural leader, a great power concert means that China will need to share power, and not just with the United States but with India, and, hardest of all, with Japan as well. This means recognising Tokyo's right to a seat at the big table.

But Japan may itself have a lot to lose in a concert. An alliance of democracies would be a big win for Japan, providing Tokyo with significant status and an unprecedented chance to boost its role in regional security affairs and to work alongside other democracies which want to see Japan play that bigger role. But, in the concert, Japan will have continually to regulate its diplomacy with China sitting across the table. This will help manage the development of its new international personality in a way that Japan will sometimes find uncomfortable.

Some of the smaller and medium powers in the region may have even more to lose from a concert—at least in the short term. Australia is simply not big enough to qualify for a seat at the really big table that a great power concert would involve. By some calculations of Australia's short-term diplomatic interests, this can make the alliance of democracies attractive as a way of boosting Australia's profile. But, in the long-term, that alliance would encourage a hostile division between the United States and China and between Japan and China. This would run counter to Australia's interests in making sure that the China-US balance does not turn ugly, and that a major conflict between China and Japan is also avoided. For that reason, a concert which includes all three of these giants, as well as India, is in Australia's long-term strategic interests. But this would probably mean a less prominent role for Australia in some of the important diplomacy of the region.

Australia still has an important role to play, often behind the scenes. China regards Australia as a strategic economic partner. The United States regards Australia as one of the closest allies it has anywhere in the world. And Japan regards Australia as an emerging security partner. With those sorts of linkages, Australia can encourage these three powers to seek the Asian concert which involves them all, however shaky and ineffective this may turn out to be. And this means continuing to support the Six-Party Talks process, even if it does not lead to a completely denuclearised North Korea. (Had the Talks dealt with North Korea's nuclear weapons issue quickly, its full potential as a bridge to an Asian concert might well have been overlooked.) Canberra regards the freezing and disablement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program as important outcomes to work towards. But the possibility of great power collaboration over the longer

term in Asia, with the Six-Party Talks acting an important step along the way, is, in this author's opinion, the more important prize.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement', 13 February 2007, available at <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t297463.htm>>, accessed 17 June 2009.

² See Robert Ayson and Brendan Taylor, 'Attacking North Korea: Why War Might be Preferred', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 23, no. 3, July–September 2004, pp. 263–79.

³ For a more recent account, see Michael Green and James J. Przystup, 'The Abductee Issue is a Test of America's Strategic Credibility', *PacNet*, no. 47, Pacific Forum-CSIS, Honolulu, 15 November 2007.

⁴ For a much less positive assessment, see Mitchell Reiss, 'A Nuclear-Armed North Korea: Accepting the 'Unacceptable'?', *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 2006–07, pp. 97–109.

⁵ See Carsten Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe: A Study in German and British International Theory 1815–1914*, Longman, London, 1970, p. 2.

⁶ See Kevin Rudd, 'A Federal Labor Government Would Enhance Australia's Security Relationship with Japan', Media Statement, 7 March 2007.

⁷ See 'China demarches to 4 nations', *The Hindu*, 14 June 2006, available at <<http://www.thehindu.com/2007/06/14/stories/2007061404451200.htm>>, accessed 17 June 2009.