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The view from Beijing

One Chinese participant in the conference said the future of the six-party talks lies in the hands of Seoul.
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The China Institute of International Studies, a research arm of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, invited government officials and scholars to an international conference in Beijing on Sept. 18 to search for a breakthrough in the long stalemate in the six-party talks. The meeting - a diplomatic endeavor of both the government and civilian sector - was held to mark the 10th anniversary of the start of the six-party diplomatic channel, which includes the two Koreas, the United States, China, Russia and Japan, with the aim of denuclearizing North Korea. I was among the speakers at the conference, which focused on themes of denuclearization, peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and the resumption of the six-party talks.

The arrangement suggested that Beijing has turned proactive in its mediating role and reviving the six-party platform, which has been in deep freeze since the last meeting in December 2008.

China has become more engaged in settling North Korea's nuclear problem because the conundrum has the capacity to seriously undermine China's "core interests." China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi - who, as an envoy to the six-party talks, mediated to normalize the multi-country process during an impasse in 2005 and produce the landmark Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement - has been keen on reactivating the six-party platform.

China's aggressive engagement in international affairs is also part of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy based on a "new type of relationship between big powers in the 21st century," which China outlined during Xi's visit to the United States, that works toward "enhancing cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues" while "respecting core interests" of each nation instead of fighting over global predominance. China wants to prove its diplomatic and peacemaking prowess by reviving the six-party negotiations on North Korea's nuclear weapons through a formal process and establishing a lasting peace and security framework in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

Chinese speakers at the forum all emphasized the need for a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula by reopening the six-party negotiations as soon as possible. They partly blamed the United States for dragging its feet. Some advised that Washington ease conditions to sit down at the table for the six-party talks and become more tolerant toward North Korea. Their comments dashed hopes that Beijing's attitude and policy - blindly protective of Pyongyang - has changed after North Korea carried out a third nuclear test despite Beijing's warning not to.

Pyongyang's presence in the part-governmental, part-private conference stood out. Key members of the diplomatic process on the nuclear problem were present, including Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's first vice foreign minister, and Ri Yong-ho, vice foreign minister and Pyongyang's chief nuclear negotiator. They echoed the same opinions of Chinese members as if they were reading from the same script. In his opening speech, Kim said denuclearization of

the Korean Peninsula had been the wish of North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il and is the country's top priority. He demanded an unconditional resumption of the six-party talks and compliance with the Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement that laid out a nuclear dismantlement procedure in return for aid and economic cooperation from the other five countries.

During his time on the podium, Ri expanded on the so-called economy-first agenda of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. He said 90 percent of Kim's 30 tours in the last three to four months have been related to the economy. His visits to military sites were meant to check on the welfare of the soldiers, Ri said. But he also said that Pyongyang cannot surrender nuclear weapons unless Washington lifts its hostile policy toward North Korea. His comments showed that Pyongyang remains wedded to its stance of "conditional denuclearization," or dismantlement based on mutual respect, equality and tit-for-tat actions and reactions that were the ideas behind the Joint Statement.

The government representatives from South Korea, the United States and Japan were of ranks lower than the Chinese and North Korean officials, and they attended the conference as observers rather than speakers. The American guests from the civilian sector reiterated Washington's official stance on North Korea. Their comments reflected Washington's remaining doubts about North Korea's commitment to denuclearization. They maintained that any talks - either on the multilateral or bilateral level - can resume when North Korea shows some decisive action toward denuclearization first.

U.S. participants demanded Pyongyang comply with the agreement Washington struck with it on Feb. 29, 2012: an immediate and complete halt in long-range missile and nuclear tests as well as uranium and plutonium development activities, and compliance with inspections from the International Atomic Energy Agency. They also said Washington has extra demands, seemingly referring to the release of Kenneth Bae, a U.S. citizen sentenced to 15 years in a North Korean prison camp.

Seoul synchronized its stance with Washington's. But it displayed some discomfort stuck in the middle between Washington and Beijing. One Chinese participant said the future of the six-party process lies in the hands of South Korea's diplomats.

South Korea is the best candidate to shuttle between the Pyongyang-Beijing-Moscow alliance and the Seoul-Washington-Tokyo alliance, and help revive the multilateral negotiations by working with China to persuade North Korea. The question is whether Seoul officials have the diplomatic creativity and competence to take up the challenge.

Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

*The author is a political science professor at Yonsei University.

by Moon Chung-in