

Track II Exchanges With The DPRK

This NCNK Newsletter discusses some of the better-known “Track II” exchanges between the United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Although Track II activities fall far outside the typical cultural and academic exchanges usually highlighted in NCNK newsletters, they play a significant role in increasing understanding between the United States and the DPRK.

What is Track II? “Track I” refers to official diplomacy or official meetings between official representatives from two or more governments. “Track II” is used to describe talks and meetings regarding policy issues at which there is no official government presence, although they might include government officials participating in a non-official capacity.

Alexander T. J. Lennon’s useful paper “Why Do We Do Track Two? Transnational Security Policy Networks and U.S. Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy” reviews two of the Track II processes mentioned below, the Northeast Asia Cooperative Dialogue (NEACD) and the Council for Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia (CSCAP).¹ Lennon reports that although some of the people interviewed in the course of his research expressed theoretical concerns that these Track II processes could reduce the DPRK’s incentive to participate in official dialogue such as the six-party talks, in fact the networks seemed to have facilitated the official talks.² Lennon notes three situations when government officials view Track II meetings as particularly useful: prior to summit meetings, in the wake (or midst) of crisis, and to help interpret political changes.³ As the new U.S. administration prepares to take office, Track II exchanges may be particularly relevant.

The DPRK and Track II Diplomacy

November 6, 2008

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On November 6 and 7 the eyes and ears of many North Korea watchers will be trained on New York, seeking news of the outcome of bilateral talks on the 6th and the National Committee for American Foreign Policy (NCAFP)/The Korea Society(TKS) Track II meeting with DPRK officials on the 7th. According to newspaper reports, Ri Gun, director general of the DPRKs Foreign Ministry’s American Affairs Bureau, will meet with the State Department’s Ambassador Sung Kim and Ambassador Christopher Hill. Henry Kissinger and perhaps Dr. William Perry will attend the meeting on the 7th.

It might seem strange that an unofficial meeting between North Korea government officials and a group of respected American North Korea experts, including U.S. former officials and maybe current government officials, generates so much speculation, particularly as it follows an official meeting. But that is perhaps understandable given that the status of these meetings lies somewhere between secret

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and public.

Track II events provide forums for all sides to present their views in an unofficial and therefore more relaxed context. Free from the constraints of diplomatic protocol, participants, even government officials, can be more creative in their discussions. Terry Lautz, previously vice president at the Henry Luce Foundation, believes that "People in the private sector, people involved in Track II, have the luxury of taking the longer view. That's enormously important in terms of creating a climate in which government then can consider other options, can think conceptually about other possibilities--might be willing to take or consider risks that might not be possible in the day-to-day fray of the give-and-take of bureaucracy."⁴ When there is considerable overlap in participants from one event to the next, Track II events also allow for relationship-building, an important aspect of informal diplomacy.

Track II events provide venues for DPRK interlocutors to reach a larger American audience, and for the policy community to hear from both the DPRK and U.S. governments. Bilateral agreements are strengthened on the U.S. side when they have the support of Congress and the policy community, and Track II events are an important opportunity for building political support for future agreements.

Leon Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, a frequent participant in Track II events with the DPRK, warns that "Whatever Track II's value as a sounding board, what matters ultimately is what the governments tell each other" in the official meetings.⁵ However, when bilateral Track II events take place prior to a bilateral Track I meeting, they provide DPRK participants a first cut at understanding the U.S. policy environment at that moment. At the same time, U.S. officials who participate in the meetings receive an early indication of potential areas of disagreement and agreement. Track II meetings between the United States and the DPRK gained additional importance when the U.S. government proscribed bilateral dialogue outside of the Six Party Talks.

It would be difficult to assess the number of Track II events with the DPRK that take place, with and without Americans, around the world. In the United States, three Track II forums have become well known because of their regularity and longevity: The above-mentioned NCAFP/TKS meetings, which are bilateral; the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue or NEACD, which are multilateral and largely, though not entirely, focused on the DPRK; and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a multilateral forum that includes the DPRK and addresses topics of broad regional concern.

Most Track II events take place far outside of the limelight, but the NCAFP/TKS events often draw unusual attention in comparison with other events. In part that's because these New York meetings have at times been coordinated with the Department of State and have been followed or preceded by Track I meetings. Therefore, there is always the possibility that a NCAFP/TKS Track II meeting will dovetail productively with Track I dialogue. At times even the scheduling of such a meeting can signal that the two governments are anticipating or at least striving for a diplomatic breakthrough.

The November 7 meeting, taking place three short days after the presidential election, has provoked considerable debate about its purpose, particularly as it follows the official meeting. Some believe that the official meeting on November 6 will be used to solidify the October verification protocol agreements made between Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and DPRK Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Gye-gwan. The meeting on the 7th, therefore, might be an opportunity to highlight that progress. Some observers hypothesize that the Track II meeting will be used to send the DPRK low-key signals about the intentions of the new U.S. administration or to facilitate coordinated communication by the outgoing and incoming administrations; others believe any such communication would be premature.

Predicting a significant outcome is not completely far-fetched. For example diplomats on both sides credited the June 30-July 1, 2005 NCAFP meeting for helping to restart Six Party Talks. Participant U.S. Special Envoy Joseph DeTrani told the organizers that "You truly played a decisive role in getting this process back in motion. Our sincere thanks."⁶ North Korea's U.N. Ambassador Han Song-ryul wrote offering thanks for "setting up the DPRK [Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea]-U.S. confidential meetings, which provided [the] decisive breakthrough for the resumption of the nuclear six-party talks."⁷

However, exceptionally few Track II events can claim immediate concrete results or elicit such glowing feedback. Sometimes it is all easy too conclude that Track II exchange of views has no instant salutary impact. In February 2006, NCAFP hosted a small meeting with Ambassador Han Song Ryul, to "brainstorm" about next steps.⁸ The U.S. Treasury Department's September 2005 decision to designate Banco Delta Asia (BDA) a "financial institution of primary money laundering concern"⁹ quickly emerged as a key concern for the North Koreans, and several suggestions were made to address this complex issue.

In March NCAFP and The Korea Society co-hosted a much larger Track II event a day before a Track I meeting convened to discuss U.S. allegations of DPRK illicit activities. According to Donald Zagoria's report of the Track II meeting, "Most of the Americans were struck by the relatively conciliatory tone taken by the North Koreans."¹⁰ And during the official meeting on March 7 "it was clear that the North Koreans had embraced some of the key ideas that had emerged from the Track II meeting month before."¹¹ However, the tone must have faltered in the Track I meeting; the US and DPRK were not able to come to any agreement. The DPRK tested short-range missiles a few days after the meeting, foreshadowing the long-range missile test in July and the nuclear test in October.

Yet in a case like this, the Track II event still proves useful, especially to observers. Zagoria's report provides insights into what would remain controversial issues between the United States and the DPRK until the resolution of the BDA impasse in 2007. The DPRK, noting that it had publically stated that the United States has a right to protect its currency, called the charges of counterfeiting politically motivated and designed to overthrow the DPRK regime. The DPRK also pointed out that the BDA designation had a "deep background;" because of U.S. policy, North Korea "has been prohibited from taking part in normal international economic activity" for the last 50 years. The DPRK said that the first step by the United States must be to lift sanctions. One of the suggestions made in the February 2006 meeting – bilateral meetings to discuss U.S. allegations of illicit activities – did eventually

become government policy, though not until after the October test.¹²

Most Track II participants are satisfied with these less dramatic but still productive results. According to Dr. Ronald Fisher from American University, seeking short-term results is “just not realistic. Most of the successful interventions in this field involve a continuing series of interactions or workshops over time--sometimes ten years or more.”¹³

CSCAP and NEACD, both founded in 1993, are characterized by such longevity. While both are regional forums, their focuses – and definition of region – are somewhat different. NEACD, which conceived of the usefulness of a non-official six-party structure a decade before the first round of official Six Party Talks, provides a “forum where foreign and defense ministry policy-level officials, military officers, and academics” discuss topics of regional importance.¹⁵ Government officials, including uniformed military officers, are their core constituency. While security is the primary focus of NEACD, it also addresses other issues, including the economy, the environment, agriculture and food supply, energy, and maritime shipping. NEACD has also developed working groups that closely explore specific issues, such as the Defense Information Sharing Study Project that examines military dimensions of regional cooperation.

While NEACD has not deliberately integrated its Track II events with Track I meetings, at times there has been fortuitous overlap. For example, a NEACD meeting that took place two weeks after the first round of Six Party Talks in August 2003 gave United States Principle Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Donald Keyser an opportunity to emphasize points made during the official talks, and correct media misinterpretations.¹⁵

And an April 2006 NEACD meeting picked up where the NCAFP meetings mentioned above left off: a track II effort with the potential to breathe life back into the September 19, 2005 agreement to denuclearize North Korea. However Track I diplomacy had not yet advanced sufficiently. According to NEACD founder Susan Shirk,

North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill didn't get any further than a brief hello when they came to Tokyo last week. The Bush administration forbade Hill to meet with Kim unless North Korea first agreed to return to the Six-Party Talks, and Pyongyang refused to return to the talks unless the U.S. lifted the sanctions it has imposed on North Korea for suspected counterfeiting of U.S. dollars.¹⁶

NEACD ended up playing one of the least-welcome Track II roles: confirmation of a diplomatic stand-off between two of the parties. However, the NEACD meeting still produced traditional track II benefits: a vigorous conversation on the possible international role in supporting the struggling North Korean economy, and prerequisites for international financial institution involvement. There was also extensive discussion on verification. Questions regarding verification raised at the meeting that could not be tackled in spring 2006 are in the process of being answered now.

In general CSCAP fills a very different niche, operating far outside the sphere of U.S.-DPRK bilateral diplomacy. CSCAP was founded in 1993 to provide a structured regional process “to contribute to the efforts towards regional confidence building and enhancing regional security through dialogues, consultation and cooperation,” and can boast of being called “the most ambitious proposal to date for a regularized, focused and inclusive non-governmental process on Asia Pacific security matters.”¹⁷ Experts from 21 countries, drawn primarily from think tanks

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and including some members of government, convene for unofficial dialogue on security issues on a regular basis. In addition to two Steering Committee meetings a year, which include representatives from the CSCAP committees of each country, individual working groups (currently six) discuss security topics of importance to the region, such as the safety and security of offshore oil and gas installations, and export controls.

In addition to being a Steering Committee member, the DPRK's Institute for Disarmament and Peace is an active member of the Study Group on Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Asia Pacific. After joining CSCAP, the DPRK has attended nearly every meeting; their participation is not contingent on bilateral developments. Thus, they have been engaged on topics of significant regional importance, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative and UN Resolution 1540 on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. CSCAP work on export controls has productively included consciousness-raising exercises "about the value of export controls generally and the specific systems put in place."¹⁸ Recently, the Study Group on Countering the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction developed a "Statement of Objectives and Basic Principles" as part of an Asia Pacific Handbook and Action Plan. This statement, to which the DPRK contributed, will be presented to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Such multilateral discussions are critical to integrating the DPRK into the broader Track II policy community dialogue.

CSCAP also addresses the DPRK's nuclear program. In these cases, there are the traditional track II benefits to educating the policy community mentioned above. For example, the chairman's report on the May 2008 at the seventh meeting of the CSCAP study group says that Ro Thae Ung (*CSCAP DPRK*) suggested "that the Six-Party Talks were not designed to bring about unilateral disarmament by the DPRK, but aimed to create a peaceful atmosphere in Northeast Asia."¹⁹ South Korean participant Hong Kyu-dok (*CSCAP Korea*) cautioned that the Lee Myung-bak administration fears that the Bush administration is "too eager to make a deal." And representatives from other nations chimed in: "There was skepticism about the completeness of the DPRK's declaration: participants argued that it should include information about proliferation activities – especially involving Syria and Pakistan -- and worried about a potential lack of clarity regarding verification measures. Several participants urged the DPRK to do more to help expose black market nuclear activities."

All Track II forums are likely to remain useful in improving US-DPRK relations, especially over the next several months. Although many of President-Elect Obama's choices for positions relating to the DPRK will likely have considerable experience with the DPRK nuclear issue and be familiar with DPRK interlocutors as well, January 20th is a long way off. In the interim, Track II exchanges – such as the NCAFP/TKS meeting this week, the NEACD meeting scheduled for mid-November and the CSCAP WMD Working Group meeting that will take place in December -- may prove fruitful venues for such future appointees to renew or maintain their contacts with the DPRK while the new administration is put in place.

Notes

1. Lennon, Alexander T.J. "Why Do We Do Track Two? Transnational Security Policy Networks and U.S. Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, Hilton Chicago, IL, January 2007, available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p178779_index.html. Thank you to Mary Beth Nikitin for bringing Dr. Lennon's research to my attention.
2. Lennon, Alexander T.J. op. cited, p. 12
3. Lennon, Alexander T. J., op. cited, p. 6-7.
4. Zuckerman, M.J., "Track II Diplomacy: Can Unofficial Talks Avert Disaster?" The Carnegie Reporter, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2005. <http://www.carnegie.org/reporter/11/trackii/index2.html>
5. Personal communication, November 6, 2008.
6. "The U.S. and North Korea: A Track II Meeting Brings Results" The Carnegie Reporter, Vol 3 No. 3, Fall 2005 <http://www.carnegie.org/reporter/11/trackii/results.html>
7. Ibid.
8. Chinoy, Mike Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korea Nuclear Crisis. (St. Martins Press: New York, August 2008), p. 268.
9. See the NCNK Issue Brief on BDA http://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/ncnk_issue_brief_bda/.
10. Zagoria, Donald S., "Multilateral Dialogue to Resolve the North Korea Nuclear Issue: Fourth Conference on Northeast Asian Security Summary Report." March 6, 2006. http://www.ncafp.org/projects/northeast_asia/roundtables/roundmar06_zagoria.pdf
11. Chinoy, Mike, op. cited., p. 269.
12. Leon Sigal, personal communication, November 6, 2008.
13. Zuckerman, M.J., op. cited.
14. http://igcc.ucsd.edu/regions/asia_pacific/neacddefault.php
15. Lennon, op cited. p. 13
16. Shirk, Susan "Informal Diplomacy Continues in Stalled North Korea Talks," The San Diego Union Tribune, April 21, 2006 http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20060421/news_lz1e21shirk.html.
17. <http://www.cscap.org/>
18. Lennon, Alexander T. J., op. cited, p. 11
19. Chairmen's Report, Seventh Meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Countering the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Asia Pacific Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, May 25-26, 2008, http://www.victoria.ac.nz/css/CSCAP_Reports_Contributions/2008/7%20WMDSG%20Mtg%20Chairman's%20Report.pdf

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