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Track II Diplomacy with Iran and North Korea

Lessons Learned from Unofficial Talks with Nuclear Outliers

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About this Report

The nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea have presented two of the most persistent, vexing challenges for U.S. foreign policy over recent decades. While there are major differences in the history and context of U.S. nuclear diplomacy with these two countries, there are also some parallels in the roles that U.S. nongovernmental organizations or private citizens have played in supplementing official efforts to address these challenges. In both cases, a handful of U.S. experts, former officials, and retired diplomats have engaged in regular Track II dialogues with officials of the other country, either complementing official talks or maintaining informal lines of communication when diplomacy has stalled. Similarly, various people-to-people engagement initiatives have sought to quietly open alternative channels of dialogue and exchange – in fields such as science, medicine, or sports – in order (at least in part) to improve the environment for bilateral relations with these countries over the long term.

This report is informed by the findings of a March 23, 2017 workshop convened by the National Committee on North Korea and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which aimed to provide a comparative assessment of the role that Track II talks and other forms of people-to-people engagement initiatives have played in addressing the challenges posed by Iran and North Korea. The workshop was premised on the notion that although lessons learned from Track II efforts with one country do not necessarily apply to the other, examining the two cases in tandem may be broadly informative about the role of Track II in U.S. relations with highly antagonistic states. The workshop's two dozen attendees included individuals with a broad range of experiences with Track II and people-to-people diplomacy related to Iran and North Korea.

The findings and conclusions of this report reflect only the views of its author(s), and do not necessarily reflect the views of any individual speakers or participants at this workshop.

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What is Track II Diplomacy, and What Can it Accomplish?

“Track II diplomacy” typically refers to unofficial meetings between nongovernmental representatives of adversarial groups or nations, convened to discuss ways to resolve conflicts. Track II participants are often former government officials or well-regarded academic experts with credibility within their governments. The Track II format also gives participants greater freedom to address sensitive issues or discuss heterodox ideas than government officials would have in formal negotiations.¹

The term “Track 1.5” is sometimes used to refer to similar meetings that include a mix of private individuals and government representatives participating in an unofficial capacity. However, North Korean and (to a lesser extent) Iranian interlocutors in unofficial meetings with Americans have almost entirely been government representatives, typically from the countries’ Foreign Ministries. Therefore, the use of the term “Track II” or “Track 1.5” diplomacy in these contexts has tended to refer to the meeting’s unofficial nature and to the composition of U.S. or third-country delegations, rather than the Iranian or North Korean side.

Track II conveners often emphasize that the meetings are not a substitute for official dialogue or negotiations. Instead, Track II talks can complement official dialogue by broaching subjects that are too sensitive to discuss in formal negotiations; by providing a forum for governments to indirectly exchange back-channel messages or float trial balloons; or by socializing participants with one another, thereby creating working relationships and a stronger understanding of the institutional dynamics at play among the other side. Ultimately, Track II can transfer results to “Track I” (government-to-government talks) by informing the decision-making of officials; by developing cohorts of people who later take part in official negotiations; or by contributing to a domestic political environment in which official negotiations are seen (both by the public and by elites) as an acceptable policy.²

Track II talks have sometimes facilitated – or been facilitated by – people-to-people exchanges between hostile groups or states on issues not directly related to conflict resolution. As with Track IIs focused on security and political issues, such exchanges help to broaden channels of communication, allow participants to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the other country, and can sometimes be employed to send diplomatic signals.³ However, people-to-people exchanges have generally focused on building public goodwill rather than informing foreign policy elites, and typically have an apolitical mandate such as advancing scientific knowledge, building capacity, or providing assistance to those in need. Sometimes they involve cultural or sports activities designed to help humanize the other country’s citizens and counteract years of negative press coverage and stereotyping.

¹ A review of the field is provided in Peter Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

² Herbert C. Kelman, “Contributions of an Unofficial Conflict Resolution Effort to the Israeli-Palestinian Breakthrough,” *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 1995), pp. 19-27.

³ Daniel Jasper, Daniel Wertz, and Catherine Killough, “Engaging North Korea: Building Toward Dialogue with U.S. Government-Sponsored People-to-People Exchange Programs,” American Friends Service Committee, June 2016. https://www.afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicaactions.net/files/documents/Engaging%20North%20Korea_WEB.pdf

Both Track II talks and people-to-people exchanges with countries such as Iran and North Korea have at times attracted criticism for – in the views of their opponents – legitimizing rogue regimes, or providing a platform for those regimes to convey the false impression of reasonableness. U.S. Government officials have expressed concern over the potential for Track II practitioners to send misleading signals or otherwise “get in the way” of formal diplomacy or policy initiatives. The long-term outlook of the Track II endeavor, and its often-secretive nature, has also made it difficult for practitioners to demonstrate immediate results to funders or other stakeholders.⁴

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Yet over the years, Track II talks have proven to be useful adjuncts to diplomatic efforts to address the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, and private foundations have provided the necessary support to institutionalize several long-standing channels for dialogues.⁵ Track II networks have opened lines of communication with these countries at times when official channels were closed, and created space for engaging in broader policy conversations at times when government-to-government talks were ongoing. At times, Track II talks have helped to facilitate, directly or indirectly, the resumption of such official dialogue with both Iran and North Korea. However, the Track II process itself has not – and could not reasonably be expected to have – resolved the fundamental policy differences between the government of the United States and the governments of Iran and North Korea, goals which remains firmly within the realm of statecraft.

Iran – Track II and the Long Road to the JCPOA

In the absence of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1980, Track II dialogues between Americans and Iranians have sought paths toward rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. While Iran’s nuclear program has been a central topic of these exchanges, Track IIs have also focused on addressing regional security issues, or on promoting confidence-building measures such as cultural or scientific exchanges. Although U.S.-Iran Track II dialogues have faced challenges over the years, their routinization has led to the establishment of inter-personal relationships between the foreign policy communities of the U.S. and Iran. Ultimately, practitioners argue that Track II talks helped shape the environment for the resumption of official dialogue between Washington and Tehran, leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran’s nuclear program. Future Track II diplomacy could also play an important role in maintaining the JCPOA and addressing broader concerns in the U.S.-Iran relationship.

Unofficial exchanges and dialogue between the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran began in earnest during the administration of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (in office

⁴ Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy*, pp. 128-132.

⁵ For a review of Track II initiatives with these two countries funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, see Patricia L. Rosenfield, *A World of Giving: Carnegie Corporation of New York: A Century of International Philanthropy* (PublicAffairs, 2014), pp. 403-407.

1997-2005). In 1998, Search for Common Ground, an international NGO focused on conflict resolution, arranged for a U.S. wrestling team to participate in a major international tournament in Tehran – the most high-profile people-to-people exchange between the U.S. and Iran since the Iranian Revolution. The initiative was received warmly by the White House and the Iranian public, and led to further sporting, cultural, and scientific exchanges in the following years.⁶ Among the most prominent of these initiatives has been a scientific engagement program led on the U.S. side by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, which started in 1999.⁷

These initial people-to-people exchanges helped pave the way for U.S.-Iran Track II talks on political and security issues. In 2002, a group of prominent retired American diplomats and experts, organized by the United Nations Association (UNA) and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), initiated what would become a regular series of meetings with Iranian counterparts.⁸ Other U.S. think tanks and universities, often working in partnership with European think tanks, also began regular Track II initiatives with Iran on political issues during this time.⁹

Javad Zarif, as Deputy Foreign Minister and later as Ambassador to the UN, was the leading Iranian figure in these initial talks, alongside a small cohort of other interlocutors – many of whom had been educated in the U.S. and had a sophisticated understanding of international affairs. The UNA/RBF initiative reached a high point in 2005, when Iranian and American discussants agreed to a joint paper, to be submitted to their respective governments, outlining a path to diplomatic re-engagement between the U.S. and Iran.¹⁰ However, these Track II efforts were thrown off course by the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president later that year, and the subsequent worsening of relations between Washington and Tehran.

As the new administration took office in Tehran, the Iranians who had previously served as Track II interlocutors with the U.S. came under suspicion and were threatened with arrest. The Ahmadinejad government's support for a Holocaust denial conference in 2006 made many former American and European Track II participants wary of further engagement; a mutual slowdown of visa approvals in Tehran and Washington, a tightening sanctions regime, and Iranian harassment of U.S. visitors also led to a significant reduction of people-to-people exchanges during this period.¹¹ Nonetheless, by 2007 Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki expressed the desire to continue Track II engagement with U.S. interlocutors, but with a different set of Iranian participants who better reflected the views of the government at the time.

⁶ Ramin Asgard and Barbara Slavin, "US-Iran Cultural Engagement: A Cost Effective Boon to US National Security," Atlantic Council, Iran Task Force, June 2013. http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/us_iran_cultural_engagement.pdf

⁷ From the start of this program through 2016, it has involved more than 1,500 active participants from more than 120 universities and research institutions in the two countries, and has generated over 20 technical reports published by U.S., Iranian, and international institutions. See Glenn Schweitzer, *U.S.-Iran Engagement in Science, Engineering, and Health (2000-2009): Opportunities, Constraints, and Impacts* (The National Academies Press, 2010).

⁸ In 2009, these dialogues were transferred to the purview of "The Iran Project," an independent project of the nonprofit Foundation for a Civil Society.

⁹ An overview is provided in Suzanne DiMaggio, "Track II Diplomacy," U.S. Institute of Peace, Iran Primer, 2010. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/track-ii-diplomacy>

¹⁰ The paper, entitled "The U.S.-Iran Relationship: Breaking the Stalemate" was written in English and translated into Farsi, but was not published. See Randa M. Slim, "The U.S.-Iran Track II Dialogue (2002-2008): Lessons Learned and Implications for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Grantmaking Strategy," Rockefeller Brothers Fund, August 3, 2010. http://www.rbf.org/sites/default/files/attachments/iranreport_0.pdf

¹¹ Asgard and Slavin, "US-Iran Cultural Engagement"; DiMaggio, "Track II Diplomacy"; Schweitzer, *U.S.-Iran Engagement in Science*.

Despite the tense political context at this time, U.S. participants in this phase of Track II dialogue described the meetings as productive. Track II talks during this period helped to inform the analysis of U.S. experts in outlining ways to achieve progress in government-to-government negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.¹² In some cases, scientists and nuclear experts joined in these dialogues to engage in technical discussions with high-level Iranian counterparts, assessing the proliferation risks of a limited, contained Iranian uranium enrichment program.¹³ The U.S.-Iran scientific exchange program led by the National Academies, which had faced significant challenges during the first term of the Ahmadinejad presidency, was able to resume a more robust schedule of programs by 2010.¹⁴ In 2011, Search for Common Ground helped facilitate the release of two American hikers who had been jailed in Iran on spying charges; realizing that it would be easier for the Iranians to free the prisoners if high-level U.S. religious leaders were involved, the organization sent a Roman Catholic Cardinal and an Episcopal Bishop, as well as a retired U.S. ambassador, to Iran for the release, which was carried out in close cooperation with the Omani and Swiss governments.¹⁵

As the Obama administration entered office in Washington, some of the regular U.S. participants in these dialogues moved from jobs in think tanks or Capitol Hill to positions in the new administration. The impact of Track II talks with Iran during the Obama administration's first term was not immediately apparent: after an initial period of U.S. outreach and multilateral P5+1 talks on Iran's nuclear program faltered, Washington's policy toward Iran shifted to focus on ramping up sanctions in order to build a stronger negotiating position. Nonetheless, even as the U.S. worked to coordinate a global economic pressure campaign against Tehran, a handful of U.S. officials with previous experience in Track II meetings played a role in establishing a secret U.S.-Iran bilateral channel in Oman.¹⁶

A third phase of Track II talks began with Iran's election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, and the return of the original cohort of Iranian Track II interlocutors to positions of influence, including the appointment of Javad Zarif as Foreign Minister. As the formal P5+1 negotiations leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) resumed, Track II meetings continued to provide a focused policy bridge between the U.S. and Iran, allowing U.S. experts from outside of government opportunities to interact with high-level Iranian interlocutors, including government officials and members of Iran's Parliament. During this period, Track II discussions on technical issues related to Iran's nuclear program also helped to supplement the P5+1 talks. Secretary of State John Kerry, for example, said that the "fresh ideas" provided by Search for Common

¹² See Thomas R. Pickering, William Luers, and Jim Walsh, "A Solution for the US-Iran Nuclear Standoff," *The New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/03/20/a-solution-for-the-usiran-nuclear-standoff/>; and Thomas R. Pickering, William Luers, and Jim Walsh, "How to Deal with Iran," *The New York Review of Books*, February 12, 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/02/12/how-to-deal-with-iran/>.

¹³ NCNK/CEIP Workshop discussions.

¹⁴ NCNK/CEIP Workshop discussions.

¹⁵ Thomas Erdbrink and Ian Shapira, "Iran Frees American Hikers After Two Years," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iran-frees-american-hikers-after-two-years/2011/09/21/gIQAFZYAmK_story.html?utm_term=.91310e6b75f5

¹⁶ Peter Jones, "U.S.-Iran Nuclear Track Two from 2005 to 2011: What Have We Learned? Where are We Going?" *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October 2014), pp. 347-366; Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (Random House, 2016), pp. 244-246; Louis Charbonneau and Parisa Hafezi, "Special Report: Iran, the United States, and the 'Cup of Poison,'" *Reuters*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-negotiations-specialreport-idUSBRE95B06B20130612>; Laura Rozen, "Three Days in March: New Details on How US, Iran Opened Direct Talks," *Al Monitor*, January 8, 2014, <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2014/01/7484/three-days-in-march-new-details-on-the-u-s-iran-backchannel/>.

Ground – which had organized Track II talks on nuclear issues with Iran alongside its cultural exchange initiatives – “helped us to achieve a breakthrough on the Arak Heavy Water Reactor.”¹⁷

The implementation of the JCPOA and the election of Donald Trump have presented new opportunities and challenges to Track II practitioners. Track II dialogues may explore ways to build upon the nuclear deal, assessing what Iran may want in exchange for extending the agreement’s restrictions on its enrichment capabilities, or what conditions Washington would require Tehran to meet before allowing Iranian banks to access the U.S. financial system. Future Track II dialogues could also address regional security issues, ranging from countering ISIS, to stabilizing Iraq, to exploring political solutions to the civil wars in Syria and Yemen. In the absence of a high-level channel of official U.S.-Iran communication, as existed between Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Zarif, Track II talks may also play a role in expanding channels of communication between Washington and Tehran.¹⁸ However, mutual recriminations over implementation of the JCPOA, as well as the Trump administration’s attempts to impose a travel ban on Iranians seeking to visit the U.S., may pose significant challenges to future Track II or people-to-people exchange efforts.

Track II Talks with North Korea

Since the outbreak of the long-running North Korean nuclear crisis over a quarter-century ago, Track II dialogues and people-to-people exchanges between the U.S. and North Korea have periodically played a role in getting official negotiations on track, sending diplomatic signals, and regularizing interactions between U.S. specialists and North Korean officials. Although there are some parallels between U.S. Track II talks with Iran and North Korea, the scope and nature of these talks has been very different between these two cases – as has been the history of these countries’ nuclear programs and their broader relationships with the United States.

While a handful of prominent Americans visited Pyongyang for talks with North Korean officials in the 1970s and 80s, U.S.-DPRK Track II contacts only began to take place on a regular basis as the Cold War was coming to a close.¹⁹ As the first North Korean nuclear crisis unfolded in the early 1990s, unofficial talks and back-channel messages played an important role, complementing official talks taking place through the “New York Channel” – the DPRK Mission to the United Nations.²⁰ Most famously, former President Jimmy Carter traveled to Pyongyang in

¹⁷ Search for Common Ground, “2016 #CGAwards: Secretary Kerry’s Message of Peace,” November 18, 2016, <https://www.sfcg.org/2016-cgawards-secretary-kerrys-message-peace/>. This Iranian reactor, which remains under construction, had been a significant proliferation concern because its spent fuel could be reprocessed to produce significant quantities of weapons-grade plutonium. Under the terms of the JCPOA, the reactor’s core was removed and filled with cement, making the reactor incapable of producing sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon.

¹⁸ NCNK/CEIP Workshop discussions.

¹⁹ For example, a small delegation of North Korean diplomats traveled to Washington in 1989 to attend a conference at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; see “Dialogue with North Korea: Report of a Seminar on ‘Tension Reduction in Korea,’” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1989. Stanford University also organized several of these early Track II meetings.

²⁰ The unofficial interlocutors with North Korea during these years included a handful of experts from think tanks and academia – several of whom have continued to hold periodic Track II talks with Pyongyang to the present day – as well as a number of prominent Americans including the evangelist Billy Graham and Congressmen Stephen Solarz and Gary Ackerman.

an unofficial capacity in June 1994 to negotiate the outlines of what would become the Agreed Framework on North Korea's nuclear program.²¹

In the years after the Agreed Framework was signed, the range of nongovernmental U.S. contact with North Korea expanded significantly, as Pyongyang called for international assistance amidst the famine taking hold in the country. U.S. and international NGOs that responded to this call struggled with the dilemmas of addressing a severe humanitarian crisis while working within the strict confines imposed by the North Korean government.²² Unofficial channels to North Korea also proved crucial to the release of an American citizen detained by the North Korean government in 1996, setting a precedent in which prominent unofficial envoys would fly to Pyongyang to secure the release of future detainees.

North Korean engagement in Track II dialogues on political and security issues during the Agreed Framework era continued in a limited fashion. Although a DPRK delegation in 1993 attended the first meeting of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) – an annual Track 1.5 multilateral forum which convened the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas – North Korean diplomats did not resume attendance at NEACD meetings until 2002. However, North Korean diplomats did regularly attend meetings convened by the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), and worked with think tanks such as the Atlantic Council to send occasional delegations to Washington.²³

Amidst revelations of a secret North Korean uranium enrichment program and the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002, North Korean engagement with Track II and Track 1.5 interlocutors increased. As the Six Party Talks began convening to address the North Korean nuclear challenge, these Track IIs offered opportunities to complement official negotiations with unofficial discussions in a less rigid format. A series of Track II conferences jointly organized by The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) and The Korea Society brought North Koreans to New York for discussions with prominent American foreign policy experts, and occasionally included U.S. officials participating in an unofficial capacity. The annual NEACD conferences, whose makeup mirrored that of the Six Party Talks, also allowed opportunities for U.S. and DPRK officials to engage in informal side conversations, though U.S. diplomats sometimes lacked the leeway to engage bilaterally in this manner.²⁴

On a handful of occasions, these Track II talks helped jumpstart official dialogue, or at least to allowed U.S. and North Korean diplomats to refine their negotiating positions. An NCAFP meeting convened in the summer of 2005, for example, achieved – in the words of Han Song-ryol, the DPRK Ambassador to the UN – a “decisive breakthrough for the resumption of the nuclear six-party talks,” leading to the September 19, 2005 statement on the denuclearization of

²¹ Carter's approach to unofficial dialogue, though, differed significantly from that of his predecessors in that he had the prominence and willingness to go far beyond the talking points approved for him by the Clinton administration.

²² L. Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder, *Paved with Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003); Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

²³ Ralph A. Cossa, “Prospects for Northeast Asian Multilateral Security Cooperation,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* (Spring/Summer 1999), 35-59; Scott Snyder, “North Korea: Engaging a Hermit Adversarial State,” in Geoffrey Wiseman, ed., *Isolate or Engage: Adversarial States, US Foreign Policy, and Public Diplomacy* (Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 85-109.

²⁴ Other U.S.-DPRK Track II initiatives, many of which have been funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, have been implemented by organizations including the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, the Social Science Research Council, and Stanford University.

the Korean Peninsula.²⁵ Track II dialogue also helped the Six Party Talks get back on track in the spring of 2007, after U.S. financial sanctions imposed in response to North Korean illicit financial activities and North Korea's subsequent first nuclear test had led to a breakdown in negotiations.²⁶

Some regular U.S. Track II dialogues with North Korea, seeking to address issues beyond the immediate security concern of North Korea's nuclear program and set the foundations for improved relations over the long term, have also facilitated people-to-people exchanges or humanitarian outreach. For example, The Korea Society – which had a long history of unofficial dialogue with North Korean officials – helped organize the New York Philharmonic's unprecedented 2008 visit to Pyongyang. Track II talks hosted by Stanford University led to a partnership with the DPRK Ministry of Public Health to build North Korea's first modern tuberculosis diagnostic laboratory.²⁷ In 2011, in an offshoot of the NEACD talks, a delegation of North Korean economic officials visited the United States for a study tour, attending university lectures and visiting multiple business headquarters in California and New York.²⁸

While North Korea has used Track II channels to send political messages on multiple occasions, Pyongyang has also – in at least two instances – leveraged its unofficial interlocutors to establish credibility about claimed nuclear capabilities. In 2004, a Track II delegation led by John Lewis and Siegfried Hecker of Stanford University was invited to tour North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility and to briefly inspect a sample of reprocessed plutonium. In 2010, on a return visit to Yongbyon, another Stanford delegation including Lewis and Hecker was shown a hitherto covert uranium centrifuge facility, revealing an enrichment program that was far more advanced than many experts had assumed.²⁹

In contrast to U.S. Track II dialogues with Iran, however, Track II talks with North Korea have generally not featured extensive discussions on the technical aspects of potential nuclear agreements. More recently, with the prospects of a denuclearization agreement looking increasingly bleak, some experts have called for quiet unofficial talks with North Korea to discuss the safety and security of its nuclear arsenal, as well as to better understand North Korea's conceptions of nuclear deterrence, command and control, and strategy.³⁰ However, it has been difficult for U.S. Track II organizers to implement ongoing dialogues with North Korean institutions outside of the Foreign Ministry, and the highly stovepiped nature of the North Korean bureaucracy has meant that DPRK Foreign Ministry officials may not be the most appropriate interlocutors for such technical discussions.

²⁵ M.J. Zuckerman, "Track Two Diplomacy: Can 'Unofficial' Talks Avert Disaster?" *Carnegie Reporter* (Fall 2005), 11.

²⁶ Karin J. Lee, "The DPRK and Track II Exchanges," *NCNK Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 6, November 6, 2008.

<http://www.ncnk.org/resources/newsletter-content-items/ncnk-newsletter-vol-1-no-6-the-dprk-and-track-ii-exchanges/>

²⁷ Sharon Perry, Louise Gresham, Heidi Linton, and Gary Schoolnik, "Engaging North Korea in Mutual Interests in Tuberculosis Control," *Korea Economic Institute, Academic Paper Series*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (February 2011).

²⁸ "DPRK Officials Visit UC San Diego as Part of Economic Study Tour," *University of California – San Diego*, press release, May 1, 2011.

<https://igcc.ucsd.edu/files/DPRK-Study-Tour.pdf>

²⁹ Siegfried S. Hecker, "Extraordinary Visits: Lessons Learned from Engaging with North Korea," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 445-455.

³⁰ NCNK/CEIP Workshop discussions. See also Robert S. Litwak, "North Korea, Nuclear Safety, and Lessons from the Iran Deal," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2016; and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "North Korea's Weak Nuclear C2 Challenges Korean Crisis Stability," *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Pacnet #22*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pacnet-22-north-korea%E2%80%99s-weak-nuclear-c2-challenges-korean-crisis-stability>. Former ROK President Park Geun-hye's proposal for a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative also included North Korea as a potential participant in a regional nuclear safety dialogue.

In the absence of sustained official dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea since the collapse of the Six Party Talks (save for the talks leading to the Leap Day Deal), Track II dialogues have continued as a mechanism for communication and information gathering. North Korean participants have used Track II talks to float trial balloons, or to hint at upcoming actions by their government; U.S. participants have been able to probe North Korea's positions in more depth than simply reading regime publications would allow, and to assess what might be realistically expected from pursuing Track I talks.³¹ Track II talks may also allow North Korean participants to better understand the objectives of U.S. policy toward the DPRK, and provide a "reality check" through which DPRK Foreign Ministry officials can provide a more realistic analysis of U.S. actions to decision-makers in Pyongyang. Furthermore, continued Track II dialogue has allowed U.S. and North Korean participants to maintain or build working relationships, providing experience and knowledge that could prove useful to both Washington and Pyongyang should government-to-government talks resume.

Differences and Similarities between the Two Cases³²

Since 2006 (if not earlier), there has been a clear conceptual difference in U.S. and international diplomatic efforts to address the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs: Pyongyang has crossed the nuclear threshold and has since made increasingly categorical commitments to retain its nuclear arsenal, while Tehran has never possessed nuclear weapons and has publicly maintained that its nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes. Although there is a long history of nuclear negotiations with both countries, Iran's nuclear program is currently constrained by the terms of the JCPOA (as well as by the Non-Proliferation Treaty), while North Korea's production of fissile material and nuclear weapons has continued apace since the collapse of the Six Party Talks. The regional politics of the Middle East and Northeast Asia are also dramatically different, as are the political systems of North Korea and Iran and their respective roles in the global economy.

There have therefore been significant differences not only in the goals and context of Track II talks with Iran and North Korea, but also in the way these talks have been conducted and their broader relationship with the policymaking process. At the same time, there are parallels in some of the challenges that U.S. Track II practitioners with Iran and North Korea have encountered, as well as in the broader question of how nongovernment actors can help address some of the most vexing foreign policy challenges facing the United States.

One major difference between Track II talks with Iran and North Korea concerns the make-up of the delegations from these countries, and their respective fits within their countries' political systems. The lineup of North Korea's primary interlocutors for Track IIs with Americans – diplomats from the Foreign Affairs Ministry's North American Division, as well as from the DPRK Mission to the UN – has remained fairly consistent over the years, changing only as more junior

³¹ Joel Wit, "How to Talk to a North Korean," *38 North*, April 22, 2011, <http://38north.org/2011/04/joelwit042011/>; John Power, "Millions Spent, But What Has Track II with N. Korea Achieved?" *NK News*, October 29, 2015, <https://www.nknews.org/2015/10/millions-spent-but-what-has-track-ii-with-n-korea-achieved/>

³² The observations in this section and the subsequent one have been primarily drawn from the March 23, 2017 workshop convened by the National Committee on North Korea and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

officials moved up the ranks and more senior ones were reshuffled to other positions. In contrast, the Iranian government's preferred Track II interlocutors have changed with the shifting political winds in Tehran, and there has been somewhat more diversity in their institutional affiliations – while most Iranian Track II participants have been affiliated with the Foreign Ministry, some have come from the Center for Strategic Research, a think tank associated with the Iranian government's Expediency Council. There has also been relatively more space for U.S. Track II practitioners to engage with Iranians academics or ex-officials who may have ties to the Iranian government, but do not directly represent it.³³

There has therefore been a greater diversity of perspectives represented by Iranian Track II delegations, creating more space for these meetings to generate new ideas or initiatives, and for U.S. interlocutors to better understand the perspectives of different factions within the Iranian political system. At the same time, it has also proven challenging at times for U.S. Track II participants to establish communication channels with Iranian interlocutors close to the country's Supreme Leader. In contrast, North Korean Track II participants have usually not ventured far beyond the party line, and have adhered to instructions from Pyongyang. Additionally, while some long-time North Korean Track II participants have moved to positions of greater influence – such as current Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho – it is uncertain whether a North Korean diplomat could attain a level of empowerment and influence within their own government commensurate with that of Iran's Javad Zarif.

Nonetheless, Americans engaging in Track II talks with both Iranians and North Koreans may have faced similar questions of how much access their interlocutors have to key decision-makers, and how information from the dialogues are transmitted within their governments. Iranian and North Korean Track II participants likely have mirrored concerns, with little way of knowing how extensively their proposals or messages are shared within the U.S. government. These issues may be particularly apt when Track I dialogues are not ongoing, and neither side has a particularly strong interest in restarting them.

There are a number of other similar challenges that American Track II practitioners with both Iran and North Korea have faced. Skepticism in Washington toward any form of engagement with North Korea or Iran has meant that Track II practitioners have faced criticism, and have sometimes been hard-pressed to find receptive ears in government. Tehran and Pyongyang's selective approaches to when, and with whom, they will engage in Track II talks have posed challenges to efforts to foster ongoing dialogue and to incorporate a broader range of perspectives into such meetings. The off-the-record format of Track II talks with North Korea and Iran has been important in both cases – creating the space for participants to more candidly discuss different ideas, and for government officials to review the proposals that come out of such meetings without having to immediately take a public stance on them – but the quiet nature of these meetings has also frequently led to media speculation about “secret talks” that have set unrealistic expectations.

³³ For example, Saideh Lotfian, a professor of political science at the University of Tehran, has represented Iran at the Pugwash Conferences on Science and International Affairs; she is also on the advisory board of a publication published by the Center for Strategic Research.

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

There is broad acknowledgement among Track II practitioners that the playbook which works for one country or situation doesn't always transfer to another. However, some practices have proven generally effective in the contexts of Track II dialogues with both North Korea and Iran.

Some of the most valuable exchanges during Track II talks with both countries, as well as relationship-building, have taken place away from the conference table in less formal settings. Convening Track II talks in relatively isolated settings, where participants can venture out of the conference room and engage in lengthy one-on-one conversations, has proven effective in the past. Socializing over dinner, after a day's meetings have wrapped up, has also enabled more candid conversations.

“While any individual Track II meeting may fail to produce immediate and tangible results, the process of ongoing dialogue builds a foundation upon which successful initiatives can be built.”

In both Track II diplomacy and various types of people-to-people exchanges, ongoing initiatives have often proven to be more effective than one-off programs – both as a means to build effective working relationships, and as a way to ensure that projects have a broader impact and discernable outputs. Science diplomacy and knowledge-sharing activities, for example, are premised on ongoing communication between participants and the publication and dissemination of results. While any individual Track II meeting may fail to produce immediate and tangible results, the process of ongoing dialogue builds a foundation upon which successful initiatives can be built. This dynamic, however, requires that both Track II organizers and funders have deep commitments to the process, continuing even amidst short-term setbacks (such as visa cancellations, complications related to sanctions, or a lack of broader political progress) and uncertainty about long-term impact.

Track IIs have also proven most effective when participants have sought to identify realistic goals – such as refining proposals for confidence-building measures, achieving greater clarity on a party's policy objectives or negotiating stance, or formulating ways to overcome specific roadblocks to Track I talks. Track II talks that break down a long-term vision into discrete, achievable steps may lead to tangible results and positive momentum, while those aiming to outline grand bargains will likely be ignored by policymakers and have little impact.

Additionally, while there has been a general tendency for Americans who participate in Track II talks with Iran or North Korea to be more favorably inclined toward diplomatic solutions than their peers in the U.S. foreign policy community, it has also been helpful when these Track II talks have represented a broad range of U.S. perspectives. A Track II delegation with a bipartisan composition may have credibility with a broader range of policymakers and nongovernment experts than a delegation with only likeminded participants. Exposing North Korean or Iranian interlocutors to a wider range of U.S. views may also be helpful as U.S. administrations change or adopt different policy approaches. Creating more channels of dialogue can benefit the overall Track II process, even as it necessitates greater coordination and information-sharing among U.S. participants who are active in these various channels.

Conclusions

Over the past few decades, U.S. Track II meetings and people-to-people engagement efforts with Iran and North Korea have created a toehold for diplomatic efforts with these countries, creating a position in which government-to-government channels of communication can be more readily established and maintained. These initiatives have also provided the benefit of a more nuanced understanding of the workings of the governments in Tehran and Pyongyang, while people-to-people exchanges of various sorts have helped to build goodwill, advance scientific knowledge, or save lives.

U.S. relations with North Korea and Iran currently appear headed toward inflection points. Washington has articulated a policy of “maximum pressure” toward Pyongyang to halt its rapidly advancing nuclear program, while keeping the door open for diplomatic engagement. U.S. relations with Iran could either see a limited détente enabled by the JCPOA’s success, or an urgent crisis with its failure. While the decisions of leaders in Washington, Pyongyang, and Tehran will ultimately be the crucial factors determining which direction these inflection points head toward, Track II and people-to-people exchanges may continue to play a modest but valuable role in shaping the environment in which these decisions are made.