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The United States and North Korea held their first high-level meeting in nearly two years in July as part of efforts to restart multilateral talks on North Korea’s nuclear program.

U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Bosworth met with North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan in New York July 28–29, telling reporters immediately following the talks that the United States “reiterated that the path is open to North Korea toward the resumption of talks” if the North showed it was willing to return to the negotiating table as a “committed and constructive partner.”

A North Korean Foreign Ministry statement carried by the state-run Korean Central News Agency Aug. 1 said, “Both sides recognized that the improvement of the bilateral relations and the peaceful negotiated settlement of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula conform with the interests of the two sides and agreed to further dialogue.” The statement also expressed Pyongyang’s interest in resuming multilateral talks “at an early date.”

Pyongyang also has said that it would be willing to observe a moratorium on the production and testing of nuclear weapons and missiles in the context of resumed talks, Russian presidential press attaché Natalya Timakova told reporters Aug. 24 after a meeting between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in Russia.

North Korea pulled out of six-way talks with China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States in April 2009, declaring that it would never return. Pyongyang has since backed away from that position, but the United States and South Korea have insisted on certain conditions before such talks begin again. In particular, the two countries have demanded that North Korea demonstrate its commitment to abandoning its nuclear weapons and related programs. Washington and Seoul also have maintained that Pyongyang must make amends for its apparent role in sinking a South Korean naval vessel in March 2010 and for shelling a South Korean island last November.

North-South talks on the two incidents made no headway in January, with North Korea denying that it sank the South Korean ship. (See ACT, March 2011.) Despite this setback, the two countries met in July, holding discussions that paved the way for the U.S.-North Korean meeting the following week. Wi Sung-lac, the South Korean envoy to the six-party talks, met with his North Korean counterpart, Ri Yong Ho, on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations meeting in Bali July 22, telling reporters following the meeting, “We are now moving to a new stage of dialogue.”

South Korean officials, however, have said they do not anticipate the resumption of six-way talks in the near future. Wi told reporters in Seoul Aug. 1 that it was “too ambitious” to expect the negotiations to begin this fall. “We cannot go to six-party talks when [North Korean] nuclear programs are up and running,” he said.

A joint statement by the foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea, and the United States July 24 following the North-South meeting welcomed the opening of such dialogue and said that it “should be a sustained process going forward.”

“North Korea must make sincere efforts to improve relations with [South Korea] before the Six-Party...
Talks can be resumed,” the statement said.

The three countries also said that North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program, which Pyongyang first publicly revealed last November, “must also be addressed in order to allow for the resumption of” multilateral negotiations.

North Korea’s nuclear weapons program traditionally has relied on plutonium produced at a five-megawatt nuclear reactor that has been shuttered since 2007. However, after years of suspicions, North Korea revealed a plant believed to contain about 2,000 centrifuges used to enrich uranium. Uranium can be enriched to low levels to power nuclear reactors, which North Korea says is its aim, but the process can also produce highly enriched uranium usable in nuclear weapons.

Posted: August 30, 2011

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/2011_09/U.S._North_Korea_Hold_Bilateral_Talks