The six-party talks were a series of multilateral negotiations held intermittently since 2003 and attended by China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States for the purpose of dismantling North Korea’s nuclear program. The talks were hosted in Beijing and chaired by China. North Korea decided to no longer participate in the six-party process in 2009. In subsequent years, other participants, notably China, have called periodically for a resumption of the process.

Leading up to the Six-Party Talks

The United States and North Korea negotiated the 1994 Agreed Framework amidst rising concerns about Pyongyang’s nuclear activities, including North Korea’s decision to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The agreement halted that decision and as part of the accord, North Korea pledged to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for energy aid, including two proliferation-resistant light-water reactors.

The Agreed Framework collapsed in October 2002 due to alleged violations from both sides. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly claimed that in a bilateral meeting, North Korea had admitted it possessed a uranium-enrichment program, which Pyongyang denied, and which would violate the deal. The United States was slow to deliver the energy aid promised in the agreement. The construction of the future light-water reactors was far behind schedule. The first reactor was initially slated for completion in 2003 but was not likely to be operational until 2008 at the earliest. See the U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance for more information. In January 2003, North Korea declared its withdrawal from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). For more information, see Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy.

In early August 2003, North Korea declared its willingness to attend six-party talks to be held in Beijing. In between periods of stalemate and crisis, the six-party talks arrived at critical breakthroughs in 2005, when North Korea pledged to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs” and return to the NPT, and in 2007, when the parties agreed on a series of steps to implement that 2005 agreement. While the steps were never fully realized, and North Korea remains outside of the NPT, Pyongyang did disable the nuclear reactor that produced plutonium for its weapons program.

First Round

The First Round of talks began August 27, 2003 in Beijing. The initial North Korean position called for a normalization of relations and a non-aggression pact with the United States, without which, Pyongyang maintained, a dismantling of its nuclear program would be out of the question. The United States had previously rejected a non-aggression pact proposal earlier that summer and remained firm on that point during the talks; this stumbling block precluded any substantive agreement in the First Round. On the second day of talks, the North Korean delegate, Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Yong Il stated that North Korea would test a nuclear weapon soon to prove that it had acquired that ability.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi outlined six points of consensus that had been reached by the
end of the round. These included a commitment to work to resolve the nuclear issue through peaceful means and dialogue, pursuing a nuclear-free Korean peninsula while bearing in mind the security of North Korea, and avoiding acts that would aggravate the situation further.

Second Round

While China called for a return to the forum, South Korea, Japan, and the United States met separately to discuss joint strategies for the next round and possibilities for a verifiable inspection system. In late October 2003, China secured an agreement from North Korean leader Kim Jong Il to return to the six-party talks, after U.S. President George W. Bush expressed an openness to providing informal security assurances short of a non-aggression pact or peace treaty. The United States, however, still would not allow its diplomats to hold direct talks with North Korean negotiators and demanded unilateral concessions on the part of Pyongyang. The central U.S. demand was that North Korea declare its willingness to the “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement” of its nuclear programs, a policy that had come to be known as CVID.

The Second Round of talks began February 25, 2004. On the second day of talks, the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the Russian lead negotiator, Vice Foreign Minister Alexander Losiukov, both reported that North Korea had offered to destroy its nuclear weapons program, but would not discontinue its peaceful nuclear activities. This represented a partial reversal from its January offer. While both China and Russia supported an agreement on this new basis, the United States, Japan, and South Korea insisted that the North eliminate all of its nuclear facilities and programs. U.S. officials believed that the North Korean civil nuclear program was impractical for economic use and was likely a front for other activities.

The Chairman’s paper that was eventually circulated at the end of the discussions in lieu of a joint statement did not include any initial steps agreements, but reaffirmed all parties’ commitment to a nuclear-weapons-free Korean peninsula.

Third Round

On June 23, 2004, the six states reconvened to begin the Third Round of negotiations. Expectations were muted by uncertainties generated by the Presidential election in the United States later that year.

In the run up to the talks, the United States circulated its first set of formal proposals for a step-by-step dismantling of the North Korean nuclear program. (See ACT, July 2004.) The proposal granted North Korea a three-month preparatory period to freeze its programs, and also requested the transmittal of a full account of activities. South Korea presented a similar proposal that largely adhered to the base U.S. demand for CVID. At the opening ceremony of the Third Round, North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan reiterated that his country was willing to accept a “freeze for compensation” program that would lead to renunciation of its nuclear weapons program.

Again lacking the consensus necessary for a joint statement, a Chairman’s statement was issued instead. In addition to reaffirming commitments made previously, the parties stressed the need for a “words for words” and “action for action” process towards resolution of the crisis.

Fourth Round

Nearly a year of uncertainty divided the Third and Fourth Rounds of the six-party talks. In part, this was due to the Presidential election in the United States, which took place in early November 2004 and resulted in a second term of office for George W. Bush. North Korea stated that it intended to wait for a restatement of the second Bush administration’s policies before deciding on whether to attend the next round of talks.

In early February 2005, North Korea declared itself in possession of nuclear weapons and said it would not attend future six-party talks. It accused the United States of attempting to overthrow its government and referred to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s statement in her confirmation hearing that North Korea was an “outpost of tyranny.” Finally, following a July 2005 meeting in
Beijing with the new U.S. lead negotiator Christopher Hill, North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan announced that his country would be willing to attend a new round of talks during the week of July 25, 2005.

One of the inducements which drew North Korea back to the negotiating table was a U.S. recognition of North Korea as a sovereign state coupled with a statement that it had no intention to invade North Korea. These were reiterated on the first day of negotiations. The resulting talks were considerably longer than previous rounds, lasting a full 13 days. The United States softened its opposition to a North Korean civil energy program, while a joint statement based on resurrection of a 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula that barred the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons was discussed. The United States also engaged in lengthy bilateral discussions with the North Korean delegation, lifting prior restrictions prohibiting U.S. negotiators from engaging the North Koreans directly.

On September 19, 2005, the six parties achieved the first breakthrough in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, issuing a joint statement on agreed steps toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula “in a phased manner in line with the principle of commitment for commitment, action for action.”

North Korea committed itself to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing programs, returning to the NPT and accepting IAEA inspections. In return, the other parties expressed their respect for North Korea’s assertion of a right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy and agreed to discuss the provision of a light water nuclear reactor “at an appropriate time.” The United States and South Korea both affirmed that they would not deploy nuclear weapons on the peninsula, and stated, along with Russia, China, and Japan, their willingness to supply North Korea with energy aid. The United States and Japan, further, committed themselves to working to normalizing relations with North Korea.

The day after the Joint Statement was agreed, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry declared that the United States should provide a light water reactor “as early as possible.” (See ACT, November 2005.) Although Pyongyang appeared to back away from that demand in the following days, disagreements over the timing of discussions on the provision of such a reactor remained.

Fifth Round

The next round of talks began on November 9, 2005 and lasted three days. The Six Parties expressed their views on how the Joint Statement should be implemented, but no new achievements were registered and substantial negotiations were neither attempted nor envisioned. U.S. lead negotiator Christopher Hill said, “We were not expecting to make any major breakthroughs.” The meeting concluded without setting a date for the next round of talks.

Following the end of the first session, the negotiating climate deteriorated significantly. U.S. sanctions on North Korean trading entities as well as Banco Delta Asia of Macau provoked strong condemnation from Pyongyang. North Korea boycotted the six-party talks once again, and conducted multiple missile tests in July and its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006.

In response, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1718 on October 14, requiring North Korea to refrain from further nuclear or missile testing, abandon its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile programs, and immediately rejoin the six-party talks.

Further discussions resumed in February 2007 which concluded in an agreement on initial steps to implement the 2005 Joint Statement. The February 13 agreement called for steps to be taken over the next 60 days in which North Korea committed to shutting down and sealing the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and to discussing a list of its nuclear-related activities with the other parties. The United States and Japan committed to engaging in talks to normalize relations, while all parties would work to provide 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil, all within the 60 day period. The United States also agreed to begin the process of removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and terminating the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act with regards to North Korea. The agreement set a March 19, 2007 date for a Sixth Round of talks and outlined a framework for follow-on actions by the six parties to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement.
Sixth Round

The next round of talks began on time but came to no substantive agreement in its initial sessions after the North Korean delegation walked out over delays in the release of funds from the sanctioned Banco Delta Asia. Diplomats had been optimistic that issues surrounding the bank had been temporarily resolved, but a technical delay in the transmittal of funds led to the announcement of another adjournment.

The IAEA confirmed in July 2007 that the 5 megawatt Yongbyon nuclear reactor had been shut down and sealed. When talks resumed in September-October 2007, a second phase implementation plan was agreed upon which called for the disablement of three key nuclear facilities at the Yongbyon complex and the provision of a list of North Korean nuclear activities, both by the end of the year. North Korea further committed to not transferring nuclear materials, technology, or know-how to other parties. The other parties agreed to increase aid to North Korea to a total of 1 million tons of heavy fuel oil or fuel oil equivalents and to a continuation of the diplomatic normalization processes.

Following numerous delays in implementation, U.S. and North Korean negotiators met in Singapore in April 2008 and agreed on three steps through which North Korea would detail or address its nuclear activities: a declaration provided by North Korea regarding its plutonium program, the publication of a U.S. "bill of particulars" detailing Washington's suspicions of a North Korean uranium-enrichment program and Pyongyang's nuclear proliferation to other countries, and a North Korean understanding of the U.S. concerns. (See ACT June, 2008.)

Further six-party talks continued in June 2008, ending with the transmittal of North Korea's declaration of nuclear activities. At the same time, U.S. President Bush announced that he had removed North Korea from the Trading with the Enemy Act and had notified Congress of the country's removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Difficulties in agreeing on a verification system delayed the second action until October 11, 2008. The need for a verification system had been reaffirmed in a July 12 joint communiqué issued by the six parties. An August 11, 2008 proposal from the United States to allow verification inspections at sites throughout North Korea was rejected emphatically. Insisting that inspections be limited to Yongbyon, North Korea announced that it was reversing disablement actions and said it would restart its reprocessing plant. A verbal agreement was established after Hill visited Pyongyang in early October. The agreement allowed for inspections outside of Yongbyon when China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States agreed by consensus.

Progress again foundered in November when North Korea denied that it had committed in the verbal agreement to allowing the collection of samples at Yongbyon. Another session of six-party talks in December yielded no new consensus. North Korea maintained that if sampling were to take place, it would not be during second phase implementation.

On April 5, 2009, after repeated warnings from the United States, Japan and South Korea, Pyongyang test-fired a modified Taepo Dong-2 three-stage rocket, ostensibly as part of its civilian space program. The UN Security Council issued a presidential statement April 13 calling the test a violation of Resolution 1718, and expanded sanctions on North Korean firms shortly afterwards. North Korea responded on April 14, declaring that it would no longer participate in the six-party talks and that it would no longer be bound by any of the previous agreements reached in the discussions.

Since the last round of talks, each of the parties involved has at times called for their resumption. In December 2010, China, Japan, South Korea and the United States called for an emergency session of the six-party talks. In 2014, a North Korean special envoy told Russian President Vladimir Putin that North Korea would be ready to resume the six-party talks. China has continued to call from their resumption, as recently as August 2017. However, there has been little progress towards continuing the six-party talks recently.

Agreements and Declarations from the Six-Party Talks
The Six-Party Talks at a Glance
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August 30, 2003: North Korea announces plan to test nuclear weapon
August 29, 2003: Six-point consensus reached at six-party talks
March 1, 2004: Countries reaffirm commitment at end of Second Round
July 26, 2005: United States declares "no intention" to invade North Korea
July 10, 2005: North Korea announces it will rejoin talks
September 19, 2005: North Korea pledges to abandon nuclear program
October 14, 2006: UN Security Council passes Resolution 1718
February 13, 2007: Parties agree on initial actions for implementing joint statement
July 18, 2007: IAEA declares Yongbyon reactor shut and sealed
July 12, 2008: Parties reaffirm need for a verification system
August 26, 2008: North Korea announces it is reversing disabling actions
April 13, 2009: UN Security Council denounces North Korean missile tests
April 14, 2009: North Korea declares withdrawal from six-party talks

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