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## Give and take on North Korea

By Donald Kirk  
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SEOUL - North Korean leader Kim Jong-il gave the perfect farewell present on Tuesday to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at the wind-up of a triumphant three-day visit to Pyongyang that seemed to delight both host and guest - if not all others with a stake in the Korean Peninsula.

China's second-highest-ranking leader was able to return to Beijing safe in the knowledge that North Korea had made a show of yielding to Chinese pressure to return to the six-party talks that the North had previously spurned. And North Korea's Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, having personally greeted Wen at the airport and then seen him off with pomp and circumstance, could claim to be doing all possible to achieve the dream of his father, Great Leader Kim Il-sung, for "complete denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula.

There was just one big problem: Kim is linking any multilateral talks specifically to the two-way dialogue with [the United States](#) that he's been demanding for years, and he's not just waiting for that dialogue to begin before going into broader negotiations with the others, China, Japan, Russia and [South Korea](#). Rather, he's awaiting "the outcome of the DPRK-US talks" - that is, the long-awaited meetings in which negotiators for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, are certain to want to go far beyond what Washington has said will be the limited scope of any bilateral [dialogue](#).

The US has already said it's glad to engage in two-way talks with North Korea, and the US special envoy on Korea, Stephen Bosworth, a former ambassador to South Korea, is expected to go to Pyongyang in the near future - in a month or two. But Bosworth has said his sole purpose is to get North Korea to return to the six-party talks, and he and top [State Department](#) and [White House](#) officials have been falling over themselves to assure wary South Koreans that they're not about to talk about a raft of issues that North Korea wants discussed.

That in itself is a stumbling block that is likely to delay the multilateral talks. Or, as Ryoo Kihl-jae, North Korean expert at Seoul's [University of North Korean Studies](#), put it, "I don't think the dialogue will be successful if the US is obsessed with six-party talks."

The betting is that Bosworth will somehow get around the problem, possibly by convincing North Korea that the only way to get into other issues is to open the six-party talks and then talk "on the sidelines" about what really matters to North Korea. That diplomatic exercise would still not be inconsistent with the US belief in the six-party talks as "the best mechanism for achieving denuclearization", as a State Department spokesman put it.

The concern in South Korea, however, is that North Korea in two-way dialogue will revert to its customary demands - enormous quantities of aid in the form of energy for its dilapidated economy as well as a peace treaty to replace the Korean War truce of 1953, the withdrawal of all American troops from the South, and "denuclearization" in the South as well as [the North](#).

The final demand in particular raises a problem that guarantees the permanence of North Korea's nuclear program. In the face of repeated US assurances that Washington harbors no nuclear weapons in South Korea, North Korea for years has said "denuclearization" means no nukes on aircraft carriers or planes in the entire western Pacific. No way, of course, will the US agree to a nuclear-free western Pacific, despite President Barack Obama's avowed desire to scale back nuclear weapons worldwide.

Kim Jong-il, however, has another more immediate goal in assenting to the six-party talks, and that is to get [China](#), North Korea's benefactor and only real ally, to go easy on the sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council after North Korea's second nuclear test on May 25.

North Korea needs export markets for conventional arms and missiles, severely hampered by the sanctions, and also wants to be able to import components and equipment for its arms industry as well as the luxury goods that Kim dispenses among relatives and members of an upper crust of military leaders, bureaucrats and Workers' Party officials on whose loyalty he counts to buttress his power.

North Korea's ultimate aim is to get the sanctions lifted - or to make them totally ineffective. The betting is that Chinese diplomats, with Kim's pledge to return to multilateral talks in hand, will be telling the Americans and others that China has now done its best to bring North Korea to terms and it's time to lighten up somewhat.

Others will no doubt adopt much the same position while US diplomats around the world persist in trying to get governments and [financial institutions](#) to freeze [North Korean](#) accounts and cut the North out of international commerce.

No wonder, then, that South Korea's immediate response was one of caution, if not concern. The immediate fear is that Wen, in return for Kim Jong-il's statement, presided over the signing of wide-ranging deals on trade and aid that North Korea badly needed after months of Chinese pressure for the North to go along with a formula for returning to talks.

The details of the deals are not clear, but immediately before and during the visit Wen and other Chinese officials came to terms on agreements for trade, tourism and software needed to begin to bring North Korea up to international standards. The view in Seoul is that these deals will undermine and circumvent the basis of the UN sanctions.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan saw the North Korean position as the latest

attempt to exclude South Korea from nuclear negotiations while looking on the South only for whatever it can gain economically from aid, trade and investment.

It was "not right", he said, for North Korea to "discuss the nuclear issue only with the US and economic cooperation alone with South Korea". His government, he promised, would press China for details on the commercial agreements that clearly were the *quid pro quo* for North Korea seeming to go along with China on multilateral talks.

Whatever happens in [negotiations](#), bilateral or multilateral, separate from the six-party talks or on the sidelines, nobody seriously expects North Korea to give up its nuclear program, much less to jettison the six to 12 nuclear devices that it's already believed to have fabricated.

North Korea may, in fact, see multilateral talks as a forum in which to pursue its desire for recognition among the world's nuclear powers. One way to do so would be to insist on holding the talks only with countries that already have nuclear warheads - meaning China, the US and Russia, but not South Korea or Japan, both of which the North would like to exclude from talks under any circumstances.

Indicative of North Korea's pursuit of nuclear glory was a South Korean report that North Korea has very nearly finished restoring the nuclear complex at Yongbyon to where it was before it went through the motions of shutting it down on the basis of six-party nuclear agreements reached in 2007. Those agreements are now seen here as flawed, if not total failures.

The South Korean view now is that the previous US negotiator, Christopher Hill, fell for the "salami tactics" of his North Korean counterpart, accepting small concessions but failing to get North Korea to come to realistic terms.

Now South Korea espouses a "grand bargain" - the term used by the conservative President Lee Myung-bak - that would promise vast aid to North Korea in return for immediate abandonment of its entire nuclear program. Nobody realistically thinks that proposal has any more chance of working than anything else, but it's sure to come up again in more endless yakking which is at least preferable to a second Korean War that nobody wants.