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Kim Jong-il Plays Lucy—Again

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Once again, there is optimism in the air about the future of the six-party talks to end North Korea's nuclear program. Following his surprise visit to China, Kim Jong-il announced that his government was ready to return to the negotiations^[3] after an absence of nearly two years. China praised his responsible statesmanship, and Russia, South Korea, and the United States all seem willing to participate in a new round of talks. Japan is the only party that is balking^[4], arguing that it is still "too soon" to expect productive negotiations.

Tokyo is right—but for the wrong reason. It's not merely the timing that makes it unlikely that anything worthwhile will come out of another round of negotiations with North Korea. The real reason is Pyongyang's lack of seriousness about giving up its nuclear program. North Korea's record over the past two decades provides strong evidence^[5] that the goal has always been^[6] to become a member of the global nuclear-weapons club. The rest is just atmospherics, diplomatic

theater, and misdirection to stall for time until the program is complete and Pyongyang can present the world with the *fait accompli* of an operational deterrent.

The other members of the six-party talks seem unable to catch on to the game, though. Their hopes rise every time that North Korean officials sound at all conciliatory. There was near euphoria in 2005 when Pyongyang finally accepted a “statement of principles” [7] that included a commitment to terminate its nuclear program. Predictably, there was then no meaningful progress toward filling-in the details of that diplomatic sketch—much less reaching the point of having an enforceable agreement that achieved Washington’s stated goal of a “complete, verifiable, and irreversible” end to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. Instead, Pyongyang embarked on a course of missile [8] and nuclear tests [9] and various other provocations, including the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel [10] in March of this year.

Despite that track record, hopes invariably rise whenever the North Korean government expresses any receptivity to resuming the six-party talks. Washington and its allies apparently are willing to play the role of cartoon character Charlie Brown and his naïve hope that, this time, he really will successfully kick the football. But Lucy always—always—pulls the ball away just as he is completely into his kicking motion, leaving him sprawled on his back. The other members of the six-party talks need to finally realize that Kim Jong-il is Lucy. He will always snatch the hope of a worthwhile agreement away. It’s time that the other governments stop being as naïve as Charlie Brown and make it clear to Pyongyang that they are no longer willing to play the fool.

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