

IMPACT PLAYERS

Kim Kye-gwan

By Andy Lim

Who is he?

Kim Kye-gwan is the first vice foreign minister of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In that capacity, he has served as the chief nuclear envoy for North Korea in the Six-Party Talks (SPT), and, therefore, as the main point person for international negotiations on DPRK's nuclear program. He served as a vice minister of foreign affairs for fifteen years before being promoted to be the first vice minister, replacing Kang Sok Ju, who was promoted to be Vice Premier. His promotion came just before the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) conference on September 28, 2010, where he was also elected as an alternate member on the Central Committee of the KWP.

Born in 1943 in Unsan County, North Hamgyong province, he graduated from the University of International Affairs in Pyongyang, and studied French in Algeria in the late 1960s. His career in the Foreign Service started as a secretary in the DPRK embassy in Algeria in 1973, and continued with a return to Pyongyang in 1975 to become a department director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He served as a specialist within the International Affairs Organization from 1985 to 1989. He was a DPRK Ambassador-a-Large from 1989 to 1991, before becoming a diplomatic general counsel from 1991 to 1995. He was promoted to the rank of vice minister of foreign affairs in 1995, and has played a major role in the SPT since its inauguration in 2003, becoming the chief North Korean negotiator during the second round of the talks held in 2004.

Why has he been in the news?

As the main North Korean interlocutor in negotiations with the U.S. and the SPT for the past decade, his travels and actions are closely watched for movement in talks. With the SPT stalled since 2009, his recent travels – various visits to China and Russia since June – coincided with a change in North Korean behavior. It went from the provocative months of December 2012 to April 2013 – missile test, nuclear test, and belligerent rhetoric – to a more benign “charm offensive” lately, punctuated by its unusually toned-down criticism of U.S.-ROK Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercises in August. This shift has been bolstered by Chinese efforts to bring back the SPT. At the invitation of the Chinese government, Kim and a North Korean delegation, including vice minister Ri Yong-ho and deputy director-general Choi Son-hui paid a five-day visit to Beijing to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the SPT and the 8th anniversary of the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement. During his surprise participation in the commemorative seminar (not attended by the U.S., Japan, South Korea and Russia top nuclear envoys) hosted by the China Institute of International Studies, he called for a resumption of the SPT “without conditions”. His position contradicts the U.S. and ROK's positions that talks can only resume with conditions attached.

What can we expect from him?

As the longest serving negotiator of the six-party talks with a wealth of experience dealing with Americans – remember he greeted Bill Clinton (2009), Jimmy Carter and Bill Richardson (2010) when they went to Pyongyang – Kim is a veteran of the SPT. With the flurry of activity within the SPT members in the last month alone, where, for example, U.S. chief nuclear envoy Glyn Davies has met with his Chinese (Wu Dawei), South Korean (Cho Tae-yong) and Japanese (Junichi Ihara) counterparts on numerous occasions, media speculations mound for resumption of the SPT. Although it is abundantly clear that China, as the conveyor of the SPT is interested in resumption of the talks, the hurdle in the end lies with whether North Korea can accept talks with conditions, or whether the U.S. and its allies can allow it without preconditions.



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