

US-DPRK Agreement: Limited Progress, but no Breakthrough (Yet)

by Ralph Cossa

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The recent “food for freeze” agreement between the United States and North Korea has been described (accurately) by the State Department as reflecting “important, if limited, progress” and (inaccurately) by the media as constituting a “breakthrough” in the seemingly endless march toward Korean Peninsula denuclearization. The good news is the agreement makes a future breakthrough once again possible after more than three years of stalemate (which began when the Six-Party Talks broke down, during the Bush administration, in the fall of 2008). The bad news is we are not any closer today to actual denuclearization than we were three years ago and have a long uphill slog ahead of us, something that the Obama administration readily admits.

The first thing that should be noted is that the “agreement” was actually two unilateral, and not exactly alike, statements, that essentially had the same bottom line: The US was going to provide the North with 240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance “with the prospect of additional assistance based on continued need” and the North will implement a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests, and nuclear activities at Yongbyon, including uranium enrichment activities “while productive dialogues continue.” The US said the North agreed to the moratorium “to improve the atmosphere for dialogue and demonstrate its commitment to denuclearization,” while the North said it was doing it “upon request by the US and with a view to maintaining positive atmosphere for the DPRK-US high-level talks.” The North did acknowledge, however, that both sides would “push ahead with the denuclearization through dialogue and negotiations.”

Both statements noted the return of IAEA inspectors to monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment activities at Yongbyon but only Washington’s statement says they will also “confirm the disablement of the 5-MW reactor and associated facilities.” The IAEA’s return, however it is couched, is a major step forward, especially given the DPRK’s previous, strongly expressed distrust for this organization. It remains to be seen how much unrestricted access the IAEA inspectors will have to all facilities at Yongbyon, however; this will be a real test of Pyongyang’s sincerity.

In its statement the US “reaffirms that it does not have hostile intent toward the DPRK.” The North claimed that the US “reaffirmed that it *no longer* has hostile intent toward the DPRK.” [emphasis added] A petty point, but one significant to Pyongyang, given its prior accusations. More importantly, both reaffirmed their commitment to the Sept. 19, 2005 Joint

Statement that laid out the original framework for denuclearization and cited the 1953 Armistice Agreement as the “cornerstone” of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, although the North added “until the conclusion of a peace treaty.” This is significant nonetheless, given various statements by the North in the past few years claiming that the Armistice no longer applied.

The US statement made no reference to a peace treaty. Nor did it specifically discuss the resumption of Six-Party Talks – administration spokesmen have subsequently made it clear that a number of important (unspecified) steps remain before such talks could resume. The North’s statement made several references to the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, stating further that once they are resumed, “priority will be given to the discussion of issues concerning the lifting of sanctions on the DPRK and provision of light water reactors” (LWRs). Washington had previously made it clear that the provision of LWRs was not in the cards, at least not in the near term. While there are some unilateral US sanctions (which the Obama administration would have great difficulty lifting in an election year absent some significant gestures on Pyongyang’s part), the major sanctions were put in place by the UN Security Council and would require UNSC approval to lift. Curiously, Pyongyang insisted and Washington agreed that US sanctions “are not targeted against the livelihood of the DPRK people.” Expect Pyongyang to continue to insist on the lifting of sanctions, if and when talks do resume (or even if they don’t), to relieve the suffering of the DPRK people.

There are a number of other areas where the two statements differ in content or emphasis. But it’s more important to focus on the issues neither addressed at all. The US statement did acknowledge that “profound concerns” remained “across a wide range of areas,” but did not articulate them. Hopefully these include the issue of verification, the straw that broke the previous camel’s back. Recall that former US Six-Party Talks negotiator Chris Hill had thought he had a verification accord worked out with the North, only to have the rug pulled out from under him at the final round of talks.

Under earlier agreements, Pyongyang was supposed to provide a “complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear programs.” What it provided previously was neither complete nor correct; is it now prepared to take this step? The two unilateral statements only make mention of Yongbyon. How about other facilities? The North’s nuclear weapons were fabricated and tested elsewhere. Will these facilities be identified and open to inspection? It’s a pretty safe bet that IAEA inspectors, if permitted to inspect the centrifuges at Yongbyon, will find that they are not (presently) configured to produce weapons-grade highly enriched uranium. But it is widely believed that other uranium enrichment facilities also exist. Will the North acknowledge these?

Also conspicuously missing from either statement is any reference to South Korea. The US has made it clear that “the road to improve [US-DPRK] relations runs through Seoul for North Korea.” Does Pyongyang now have a shortcut? This would be a huge mistake. While the North remains intent on marginalizing the current Seoul administration, Washington must continue to insist on meaningful North-South dialogue as one of the steps that must still be taken prior to the resumption of Six-Party Talks.

It appears that Washington’s “strategic patience” in dealing with the North may finally be paying dividends. But the real strength of this approach was that Washington and Seoul remained in lockstep throughout the process. The US needs to proceed cautiously, in a way that continues to validate both its own and Seoul’s cautious approach to the North. If they can do this, then a real breakthrough may one day be possible.

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