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A Verification Regime for the Korean Peninsula
by Brad Glosserman

LAS VEGAS, NV - Any real solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis will ultimately be a "Grand Bargain" with military, economic, political, and diplomatic components. Fashioning that deal will require aggressive and creative thinking. The lack of trust in Pyongyang and Pyongyang's lack of trust in all other governments means that verification measures will be extremely important - as well as extremely difficult to create.

One option - a Korean Peninsula Nuclear Verification Regime - was tabled last week at a meeting of nuclear energy experts from the Asia Pacific region. The meeting was part of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a network of think tanks that Pacific Forum CSIS, my home, helped to found a decade ago. CSCAP is a nongovernmental, track-two organization: it brings together experts and officials to discuss regional foreign policy and security issues. Because all meetings are off the record and individuals attend in their personal capacities, we can pursue dialogue, build confidence, and float ideas without claiming to speak for our governments. Creative thinking and frank speaking are encouraged.

The Nuclear Energy Experts Group (NEEG) focuses on questions and problems surrounding the nuclear energy research and production in the Asia Pacific. Its findings are available on the Nuclear Energy Transparency Web site (www.cscap.nuctrans.org). The NEEG has visited facilities across the region. Those have been real confidence building measures: Chinese scientists were extremely impressed with the candor and information they received two years ago during a visit to the Rokkasho reprocessing plant in Japan. Last week, we met in Las Vegas because it's close to the Yucca Mountain high-level waste repository, where the U.S. government will house spent nuclear fuel and other forms of highly radioactive waste.

The NEEG mandate is nuclear energy issues, and nonproliferation concerns in particular. The verification proposal fits that agenda. The proposal, by John Olsen, a scientist at the Cooperative Monitoring Center of Sandia National Laboratories, is designed to bring all concerned countries into the effort to ensure that the Korean Peninsula remains denuclearized. (It reflects his personal views, not that of the U.S. government.) Despite Pyongyang's claim that the question is a matter for "knee-to-knee" talks between only itself and the U.S., other countries have an equally important stake in the resolution of the problem. North Korea's neighbors' own security is affected by a North Korean nuclear program, all countries have interests in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which could be fatally compromised by a breakout, and the two Koreas promised to refrain from developing nuclear weapons in their 1992 Joint Declaration. North Korea has made similar pledges in the 1994 Agreed Framework and the Joint Declaration with Japan in September 2002.

Olsen anticipates the establishment of a multilateral institution to verify denuclearization of the Peninsula, nonweaponization of nuclear materials, and the implementation of safeguards (in conjunction with the International Atomic Energy Agency). A multilateral regime makes sense: it would give all concerned countries a reason to work for its success and could defuse North Korean fears that it is intended only for them, which would compound North Korean insecurity.

A multilateral framework is also in order since any grand bargain with North Korea will have to address economic issues and provide energy supplies to the country; the bulk of that aid will come from its neighbors. Finally, a key component of any deal will be security guarantees for North Korea. Bringing other countries into that process should allay North Korean fears, and make those guarantees more credible in the long run.

Would other countries be willing to join the effort? They should. They'd all benefit from increased stability and security on the Peninsula. China, Russia, and Japan would have some say in regional security issues; they worry that a bilateral U.S.-North Korean deal would minimize their influence. The plan would provide employment for Russian nuclear scientists, a real benefit when there are fears that they might sell their services to the highest bidder. In addition, it would provide a regular forum for North-South discussions in security matters, one element of intra-Korean dialogue that has been sadly lacking.

Olsen's proposal envisions the verification regime eventually taking on other security related issues, such as ballistic missiles or conventional forces. I think the organization should take on new responsibilities as well, but its expertise would be better used by focusing initially on nuclear energy related issues. The regime could become the core of an institution that deals with the region's growing problem of nuclear waste. It is estimated that 29,370 tons of spent fuel accumulated in Asia from 1960-2000; another 21,240 tons should be created in this decade. (This is just spent fuel; there are other forms of waste, too.)

The mountains of radioactive waste will grow. The U.S. Energy Information Administration's International Energy Outlook 2003 forecasts substantial increases in nuclear energy production in Asia: "China, India, Japan and South Korea are projected to add a combined 45 Gigawatts between 2001 and 2025. As of February 2003, the nations of developing Asia accounted for 17 of the 35 nuclear reactors under construction

worldwide, including 8 in India, 4 in China, 2 each in South Korea and Taiwan, and 1 in North Korea."

No Asia Pacific country has come up with a real solution for this growing problem on the back end of the fuel cycle. Most governments have temporary storage facilities; Japan will recycle its plutonium as mixed oxide fuel, but even that facility can't handle all the waste and spent fuel.

Every government faces the same problem: a public that is suspicious and scared of nuclear energy and a political leadership that is not willing to make hard choices. It makes more sense to tackle the problem collectively, to minimize public protests and defray the costs (which is one way of winning local support for the eventual storage site).

The expertise in nuclear matters accumulated by the Korean Peninsula Verification Regime should be used to handle the region's backend problems. After all, one of its key assignments will be disposing of North Korea's spent fuel. The process of constructing and running the regime will help build the confidence among governments and nuclear authorities that will be essential to its success - and ultimately stabilize the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

Brad Glosserman is director of research at Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at bradg@hawaii.rr.com