



Living with a nuclear North Korea

by Brad Glosserman

All participants in the Six Party Talks – including North Korea – say that the goal of the negotiations is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Don't bet on it. An unblinkered assessment of the various interests forces one conclusion: the world must prepare for a "gray" North Korea, a nation with a suspected but unconfirmed limited nuclear capability.

This conclusion is based on three premises. First, Pyongyang will do everything possible to preserve some nuclear weapons capability. For more than four decades, North Korea has sought to acquire or develop a nuclear weapon. This interest is understandable, at least from a North Korean perspective. Pyongyang was threatened by the U.S. with atomic bombs during the Korean War. It is the ultimate piece of military hardware for a government committed to a "military first" policy. Nuclear weapons are an important status symbol for a regime desperate for legitimacy. Building a bomb suggests North Korean technical superiority over South Korea. Finally, it is seen by North Korean strategists as the guarantor of regime survival.

Any one or combination of these rationalizations drives North Korean behavior. Given North Korean history and suspicions, it is extremely unlikely that Pyongyang would abandon its nuclear programs and give up all the weapons it has developed.

Second, despite their rhetorical commitment to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, neither China nor South Korea is ready to enforce the strict verification regime required to eliminate all North Korean weapons. Neither country wants North Korea to demonstrate conclusively that it has nuclear weapons; neither, however, do they want to push Pyongyang so hard to denuclearize that it is destabilized. Both wish to preserve the North Korean government and do not want the chaos and uncertainty a "no tolerance" policy would create.

There are three ways North Korea could have developed nuclear weapons. The first is with fissile material generated prior to the signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994. According to that agreement, this material would have been accounted for only prior to the delivery of critical components needed for the operation of light-water reactors built by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Most intelligence agencies estimate this is enough for 1-4 weapons.

The second source is the 8,000 fuel rods frozen by the Agreed Framework, and recently reprocessed by the North. Some additional material may have been generated since the collapse of the Agreed Framework. The third source is the

enriched uranium program that the U.S. has charged North Korea with developing in violation of the Agreed Framework.

North Korea is probably ready to give up the second and third sources. It agreed to turn over the fuel rods in the Agreed Framework and while it denies having a clandestine uranium program, Pyongyang has reportedly asked what it could receive for abandoning it.

That leaves the plutonium acquired before 1993 and the weapons allegedly created with it. North Korea is unlikely to give this up. Pyongyang's inclination to clutch at this option is strengthened by doubts whether the IAEA can determine how much fissile material was diverted from the North Korean nuclear energy program prior to 1993. China and South Korea are likely to accept this: Combine the North's belief in the value of such weapons with Chinese and South Korean reluctance to push the North to the brink and you have the basis for a compromise. Indeed, Seoul and Beijing have lived with just this situation – a North Korea with a few crude nuclear devices – since 1994. When asked point blank at conferences, Chinese and South Koreans have said that they have lived with a "gray nuclear North Korea" for over a decade. Since China has a permanent veto in the United Nations Security Council, the authority to which the U.S. would turn if the Six-Party Talks prove fruitless, the threat of international sanctions looks toothless.

Thus, the third critical point: the U.S. is going to have to accept this, too. China and South Korea (and Russia) will not back the U.S. demand for "complete verifiable" nuclear disarmament. In these circumstances, it is Washington, not Pyongyang, that risks isolation for pushing too hard. (The Japanese could come down either way.) Doing so could alienate South Korea and marginalize the U.S. on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, the real strategic prize. Moreover, accepting the ambiguity surrounding the original plutonium is merely going back to the status quo ante of the Agreed Framework.

By this logic, a six-party agreement would be a gradual process that dismantles the North Korean nuclear infrastructure, starting with the 8,000 fuel rods and then moves on to the disputed uranium enrichment program. Dismantlement by the North would be matched by economic aid from the South, humanitarian assistance from other parties and diplomatic recognition from the U.S. The process would be long and carefully calibrated, but by the end the North would be left with whatever nuclear weapons had been built from the fissile material generated before the Agreed Framework and had been hidden.

The chief concern is whether this deal would be consistent with the NPT. Reportedly, the IAEA will have difficulty providing a complete accounting of North Korea's oldest plutonium stocks; that fudge could preserve the credibility of

the agency and the treaty, and discourage other countries from trying to copy North Korea.

This is not a happy solution, but it is, by this logic, the best and most realistic solution available. In many ways, it is an updated Agreed Framework: it kicks the can of complete dismantlement down the road. The critical question is whether any such deal can be sold in the U.S. given the political beating that agreement has endured and the image of North Korea in Washington.

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Six-Party Talks: Prospects for Success

by Ralph A. Cossa

The Six-Party Talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons programs are set to resume in Beijing July 26 after a 13-month hiatus. But what are the prospects for success? Some, particularly in China and South Korea, see the mere act of talking as progress . . . and certainly talking is better than not talking. But it is clearly not enough.

The U.S., for one, has made it clear that it is expecting some movement toward its ultimate goal: the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, a goal that, at least on paper, the other five parties (China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and even North Korea) profess to share. "We don't intend to engage in talks for talks' sake," insisted U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In fact, all six parties, in one way or another, have said they want to see real progress made at this fourth plenary session.

Progress is possible if Pyongyang is serious about trading away its nuclear programs and Washington is equally serious about cutting a deal. There are some positive indications that this may finally be the case. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il reportedly told visiting ROK Unification Minister Chung Dong-Young that the 1992 Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was the "dying wish" of his father and was "still valid." This gives the junior Kim the political cover he needs (if, in fact, he really needs political cover, as some analysts suggest) to press on with denuclearization. Of note, the 1992 Declaration, while not ruling out nuclear power plants (the ROK has several of them) also prohibits reprocessing, which has (rightfully) been one of Washington's major concerns about Pyongyang's "peaceful" nuclear energy program.

Washington has also indicated that it is prepared to be more flexible regarding economic incentives, praising the South's recent energy proposal (which presumably lays to rest the resumption of the 1994 Agreed Framework's ill-fated light water reactor (LWR) project). Secretary Rice has cautioned that "North Korea's energy needs will be considered only after North Korea agrees to dismantle completely its nuclear weapons program." [emphasis added] This is significant since the original Washington position was that no rewards would be provided *until dismantlement was complete*. While Washington is still not prepared to "reward bad behavior" in advance, it seems willing to allow Seoul and others to do so in return for North Korea's agreement to dismantle, with rewards

no doubt timed to coincide with concrete actions by Pyongyang. (This flexibility was signaled in last June's U.S.-tabled proposal but without the specific plan now being offered by the ROK.)

While the negotiating process promises to be a long, drawn-out one, observers will have an early indication of Pyongyang's seriousness. This can be summed up in one word: uranium! The crisis began with the revelation that North Korea had a clandestine uranium-based weapons program that subverted the 1994 U.S.-DPRK agreement to denuclearize the peninsula in return for energy assistance (heavy fuel oil deliveries, followed by the construction of two LWRs). According to the U.S., Pyongyang privately acknowledged the program but now publicly denies this. "Complete" denuclearization requires Pyongyang to acknowledge all its nuclear programs.

Again there is some hope. The U.S. has been claiming that the North has a (weapons-related) highly enriched uranium program. According to Chinese interlocutors, while the North rejects this claim it has been more circumspect about the existence of a possible (energy-related) uranium enrichment program. Acknowledging the centrifuges that Washington has firm evidence Pyongyang has acquired but claiming that they were for a peaceful fuel fabrication program – while not necessarily credible – would provide one way to get past this hurdle.

If Pyongyang really accepts the ROK offer to satisfy the North's electrical energy needs, then it no longer needs a peaceful nuclear energy program and can give up (or, more likely, sell back) its uranium enrichment equipment. There is also the "A.Q. Kim option," where the North can suddenly discover a rouge scientist conducting programs behind the Dear Leader's back – outlandish as this sounds, a similar cover story was used to explain Pyongyang's about-face when it acknowledged that Japanese civilians had been kidnapped.

It is too early to be either optimistic or pessimistic about the prospects for success of the talks, but how Pyongyang deals or fails to deal with the uranium issue will provide a major indication of the North's sincerity. Stay tuned!

P.S.: The North added an 11th-hour wrinkle by calling for a peace treaty to replace the 1953 Armistice. This was Pyongyang's for the asking in 1999 when, for reasons still not explained but presumed to be centered around its reluctance to sign a treaty if Seoul were a signatory, the North walked away from the Four-Party Talks (with the ROK, China, and the U.S.) which was aimed specifically at achieving that objective. It is not clear if the latest demand is for a bilateral U.S.-DPRK treaty (which Washington would and should find unacceptable) or if the DPRK is finally ready to involve the ROK in the process.

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