



Six-party statement of principles: one small step for man by Ralph A. Cossa

The agreement on denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula reached on Sept 19 in Beijing was “one small step for man.” It is, however, premature to call it a “giant leap for mankind.” The agreement provides a template for working toward a solution to the denuclearization problem; it is not yet a roadmap, however, and leaves many critical questions unanswered.

Most significantly, if Pyongyang is indeed sincere, it represents the “strategic decision” long insisted upon by Washington as the first step in the process: the agreement by North Korea to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs” and return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

In return, Pyongyang will get much needed economic and energy assistance and an agreement by the other parties “to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light-water reactors to the DPRK.” Most importantly for Pyongyang, it acknowledges a sequential approach; the denuclearization agreement will be accomplished in “a phased manner in line with the principle of ‘commitment for commitment, action for action.’” It also asserts that Washington “has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons.”

Almost all of this has been said before; much was included in the Chairman’s Statement issued by the Chinese after the third round of talks, in June 2004. What’s significant is that all six parties have this time signed up to this statement of principles. The objectives are now clear. The devil, as always, will be in the details.

One detail that remains critical to Washington – and to the success of the agreement – is a definition of “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” This statement successfully finesses the disagreement over whether a uranium enrichment program exists in the North – Washington says it does; Pyongyang still denies it. Agreeing that “all” programs will be included is only significant if there is agreement on what constitutes “all.”

The five-week recess in this round of talks was caused by disagreement over the North’s demand that it still be provided light-water reactors (LWRs), as called for in the original 1994 Agreed Framework between Washington and Pyongyang. This problem was not solved; it was merely deferred to “an appropriate time,” ensuring that more debate (and delay) is in the cards. The other main problem was disagreement over sequencing. Again, while an agreement was reached on this principle, the “commitments” and “actions” have yet to be defined, much less put in an agreed upon order.

Also in the “good news, bad news” category is the issue of energy assistance to Pyongyang. The statement “reaffirmed” the ROK offer to provide 2 million kilowatts of electric power to the DPRK. It did not indicate if the North was prepared to settle for this offer, much less accept it as a substitute for the LWRs (which, by no mere coincidence, were to have provided the same amount of power).

The statement also noted that “the directly related parties will negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum.” Unfortunately, it did not reveal who the “directly related parties” might be. Recall that North and South Korea, China, and the U.S. were all engaged in Four-Party Talks several years ago to accomplish just that. The talks broke down over Pyongyang’s refusal to acknowledge that Seoul should be a signatory – it wanted a bilateral peace treaty with Washington. Has this position changed?

Another important missing element is discussion of security assurances or guarantees. The statement includes a promise by Washington not to attack or invade the North, but does not address the behavior of the other parties. If North Korea employs military force against South Korea or Japan – two U.S. treaty allies – is Washington prohibited from responding? Is stopping a North Korea ship suspected of smuggling nuclear weapons (or drugs or counterfeit currency) an “attack”?

All of this is not to demean the agreement – it represents a vital first step. It makes a breakthrough possible; whether or not that breakthrough in fact occurs depends on how committed all parties are to now rolling up their sleeves and addressing the hard questions thus far deferred, when they reconvene in Beijing in early November 2005.

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