



Korean Peninsula Denuclearization: First Steps by Ralph A. Cossa

The agreement hammered out in Beijing by the delegates to the latest round of Six-Party Talks does not represent a significant step toward Korean Peninsula denuclearization, at least not yet. But, it does represent a step in the right direction.

The first step, as described in the Feb. 13 Joint Agreement, will not make things appreciably better. However, if honored, it will at least prevent things from getting worse. It will “shut down and seal” (Washington was hesitant to say “freeze”) the North’s nuclear facilities at Yongbyon “for the purpose of eventual abandonment.” While still reversible at this stage, it at least temporarily halts the North’s plutonium-based weapons program and brings the current facilities and fuel rods back under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) control. This is well worth the up front cost – the provision of “the equivalent of 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil” in the next sixty days.

(There is, regrettably, one caveat to the “not make things worse” assertion: the agreement does not include a pledge to refrain from future nuclear weapons testing. One presumes, however, that Pyongyang understands that such an action would quickly and seriously undermine the agreement.)

Most importantly, the agreement provides renewed hope to a previously seemingly hopeless situation by reviving the possibility of a peaceful, negotiated solution to the nuclear standoff. So, hats off to Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill (and to his Chinese, South Korean, Japanese, Russian, and, yes, even to his North Korean counterparts). Congratulations also to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George W. Bush for finally seeing the light and giving serious negotiations a chance. But don’t put the champagne on ice just yet; remember, this is North Korea we are dealing with.

Even the most ardent supporters of direct negotiations with Pyongyang have always added the caveat that no one really knows for sure if North Korea is really willing to give up its nuclear weapons. The argument was that we would never know unless we tested the proposition. Well, the test has begun, and it has a 60 day initial expiration date.

The real crux of the test is not the Yongbyon freeze but the “list of all its nuclear programs” that Pyongyang must prepare and discuss with the other parties, presumably at the working group meetings that will convene within the next 30 days, but at a maximum within the specified 60 day first stage. This specifically includes the plutonium extracted from used fuel rods, which are currently unaccounted for. From a U.S. perspective (but not specified in the Joint Agreement, other than under the “all its nuclear programs” caveat), it must also

include an acknowledgment of a suspected highly enriched uranium (HEU) program.

It is hard to imagine how the process could proceed without some accounting for the centrifuges and other uranium enrichment equipment clandestinely provided to North Korea through the since exposed and confirmed A.Q. Khan nuclear suppliers network. Ambassador Hill has reportedly delivered this message, very specifically and most pointedly, to Pyongyang. The bigger question is whether or not Washington has made this point equally clear to the other parties and if they too are prepared to treat HEU as a “pass-fail” issue. If not, we will be right back where we started, with Pyongyang once again playing Washington and its other negotiating partners against one another.

Even during this first stage, the sequencing is not clear. Which comes first, the initial aid/fuel oil shipment of the freeze/return of IAEA inspectors? Given Pyongyang’s paranoia (and hard-nosed bargaining tactics), it is hard to imagine the North making the first move. In that case, Washington and/or the others should! Again, it is a small price to pay for testing Pyongyang’s sincerity (and for building support among the other parties for firmer action if the North reneges).

If the North comes clean on its initial list of “all existing nuclear facilities,” then the real process of denuclearization can begin. The “next phase,” of unspecified duration, will include the “disablement of all existing nuclear facilities” in return for “economic, energy, and humanitarian assistance up to the equivalent of one million tons of heavy fuel oil.” Note that this does not mean that the United States will be providing a million tons of fuel oil, as many press reports have been stating. The other parties, combined, will provide “the equivalent” of a million tons of HFO in “economic, energy, and humanitarian assistance.”

For sure, symbolic shipments of fuel oil will be included. But other types of aid from the other parties (except Japan, absent some progress on the abductee issue – the fate of Japanese citizens presumed kidnapped by North Korean agents and still unaccounted for) will also be counted. Moscow, for example, has already indicated that its assistance will likely come in the form of debt relief, with the amount being counted against the “million tons equivalent.”

We can almost certainly predict future disputes over what types of aid and assistance are to be counted against the total goal and, here again, sequencing will be a major issue, to be worked out by the various working groups prescribed in the Feb. 13 Joint Agreement.

One lingering concern is the absence of any reference in the agreement to Pyongyang’s current inventory of nuclear weapons. No one currently knows how many exist and where

they might be. Of course, “denuclearization” means giving up weapons as well as programs/facilities, but we should not be surprised if Pyongyang chooses to make a distinction between the two and tries to hold on to any actual weapons until all other milestones, including normalization of relations with the U.S. and Japan, have been realized.

In short, even if the North has really made the “strategic decision” to eventually give up its nuclear weapons – a premise not yet but soon to be tested – the road ahead is sure to be a long and torturous one.

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