



Korean Peninsula Denuclearization: So Far, So Good

by Ralph A. Cossa

Good news from Beijing! The joint declaration from the recently concluded round of Six-Party Talks points to a significant step forward, provided Pyongyang follows through as promised with a significant series of denuclearization steps between now and the end of the year. As has often been the trend in the talks, however, the most critical issues seem to have been kicked down the road and remain subject to further deliberation.

The Sept. 27-30 round of talks ended with a sense of anxiety as the participants reported that they needed to bring the proposed agreement on “Second Phase Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement” back home for final review and approval, raising the specter of renewed stonewalling by North Korea. But North Korea’s “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il apparently signed off on the Chinese-produced draft (as did President Bush and his South Korean, Russian, and Japanese counterparts) and the “breakthrough” was subsequently announced on Oct. 3. The implementation plan commits Pyongyang to “disable all existing nuclear facilities,” with the already shut down facilities at Yongbyon – the 5MW reactor, reprocessing plant, and fuel rod fabrication facility – scheduled for disablement by the end of 2007.

The U.S. will lead (and fund) the disablement activities. While not specifically defined in the agreement, a team of experts that had previously traveled to Yongbyon to examine the facilities indicated that “disable” meant render inoperable for at least three years, if not forever (in contrast to the 1994 “freeze” which resulted in Pyongyang bringing the Yongbyon reactor back on line within a few months after the original Agreed Framework was officially abandoned in 2003).

This is no small accomplishment. With the disabling of the Yongbyon facilities, North Korea will be unable to produce more weapons-grade plutonium. This is a major step forward. Also required under the Oct. 3 implementation plan is a “complete and correct declaration of all [North Korean] nuclear programs” by the end of the year. While the term “uranium” appears nowhere in the declaration, State Department sources assert that the DPRK also agreed (at a bilateral meeting in Geneva that preceded the last round of Six-Party Talks) to address U.S. concerns related to uranium enrichment programs and activities. It was U.S. accusations regarding this program that caused the 1994 denuclearization agreement to collapse.

Of equal importance (but largely overlooked in reporting on the implementation plan), the North “reaffirmed its commitment not to transfer nuclear materials, technology, or know-how.” The reaffirmation addresses one of Washington’s primary concerns: that Pyongyang would export its weapons,

fissile materials, or nuclear knowledge to third parties. It implies, as Pyongyang has already asserted – and despite unconfirmed press speculation surrounding the recent Israeli air strike to the contrary – that it has not provided nuclear-related assistance to Syria (or anyone else). Proof of any past or future nuclear-related assistance by Pyongyang to third parties will undermine (if not scuttle) the six-party process.

Of potential interest on a related note, President Bush, in his own description of what the North’s “complete and correct declaration” would include, identified “all its nuclear programs, nuclear weapons programs, materials, and any proliferation activity.” [*emphasis added*] While Bush may have misspoke, this would indeed be a breakthrough if true.

The implementation plan also recalls Washington’s earlier commitment to “begin the process” of removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and states that the U.S. will fulfill this commitment “in parallel” with North Korea’s fulfillment of its Oct. 3 responsibilities, based on the “consensus” reached at bilateral U.S.-North Korea Working Group meetings. There does not appear to be consensus on what this consensus is, however.

Head North Korean negotiator, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-Gwan, has said that Washington has promised to remove the North from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list by the end of this year. Washington has been much more circumspect about the timing, however, indicating that it is contingent on the DPRK’s “fulfillment of its commitments on providing a declaration and disabling its nuclear facilities.” Since only the Yongbyon facilities are scheduled for disablement by December 31, 2007, this provides Washington some wiggle room. However, it is not too difficult to imagine Pyongyang once again walking away from the process until it is removed from the list.

Intertwined in all of this is the North Korea-Japan normalization process, which both are committed to making “sincere efforts” to address. A dispute over “full accounting” regarding Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea in the 1970s/80s has resulted in a stalemate. Pyongyang acknowledged the kidnappings in 2002 but claims the issue is now settled (with the return of five abductees and the announcement that eight others had died). Tokyo disagrees: it refutes both the accounting of how the eight died and believes there are more abductees not acknowledged or accounted for.

More importantly for Washington, Tokyo believes it has a commitment from President Bush that the U.S. will not remove North Korea from the terrorist sponsors list until there has been “progress” in resolving this dispute. With a change in government in Tokyo, there may be more flexibility on this issue; former Prime Minister Abe epitomized the hardline approach toward the DPRK and new Prime Minister Fukuda does not carry this baggage. But it will require some

movement by Pyongyang as well. Meanwhile, Washington's lead negotiator, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Christopher Hill has said that he will soon begin consultations with the U.S. Congress on ways to strike North Korea from the list of terror sponsors and that bilateral discussions next week with the North would discuss details of the removal. One hopes that he will be discussing this issue with Tokyo as well. Hill appears well aware of Tokyo's concerns, but suspicions in Japan about his perceived over-eagerness to accommodate Pyongyang continue to make this a sensitive alliance issue.

This may be a moot point, however, if Pyongyang fails to come clean on the full extent of its nuclear programs and inventory. As a result, all eyes will now be on North Korea's "complete and correct" declaration of its nuclear programs. At a minimum, and discounting for the moment President Bush's reference to "any proliferation activity," Washington's definition of "full accounting" includes not only North Korea's uranium enrichment activities, but its plutonium stockpiles and bomb-making facilities as well. The actual disposal of Pyongyang's inventory of fissile material (including any explosive devices) is not likely to take place before 2008 and will likely require additional negotiations.

The disabling of Yongbyon's nuclear facilities and resulting end to North Korea's plutonium production capabilities will prevent matters from getting worse. True denuclearization will not be able to begin, however, until all of Pyongyang's fissile material is put on the table. There are still miles to go before we put this issue to sleep.

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