



North Korea: Settling for Half a Loaf by Ralph A. Cossa

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The conventional wisdom is that the Bush administration, in its never-ending face-off with North Korea over its nuclear ambitions, has once again been the first to blink. President Bush has been severely criticized for removing North Korea from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List prior to actual verification of North Korea's June 26 "complete and correct" nuclear declaration. The only thing that appears to be verified thus far is that Pyongyang's declaration was neither "complete" nor "correct."

Overlooked in the delisting debate is a significant potential breakthrough in the six-party process, IF (and this remains a big IF) the verification regime described by Washington is implemented. Washington may have once again settled for half a loaf, but if a verification regime is finally put in place that will allow an accurate accounting of Pyongyang's plutonium stockpiles, it will at least be the right half.

The U.S.-North Korea joint document on verification will be reviewed at the next (yet to be scheduled) Six-Party Talks meeting where it will be finalized and formally adopted. Once it has been "Six-Partyized," it will presumably be released to the general public. (One says "presumably" since the June 2008 original North Korean declaration has yet to be publicly released.)

Pyongyang has reportedly agreed that experts from all six parties will have access to all declared North Korean facilities and, "based on mutual consent," to undeclared sites and that the IAEA will have "an important consultative and support role" in verification. Agreement has reportedly been reached on the use of scientific procedures, including sampling and forensic activities, and on access to additional documentation; Pyongyang has reportedly also agreed that samples and documentation can be taken out of the country for further examination. While there was no reference to access to North Korean experts and nuclear specialists – an original U.S. verification demand – a State Dept. spokesman stated unambiguously that "Every element of verification that we sought is included in this package." According to Washington, all measures contained in the Verification Protocol will apply not only to the North's plutonium-based program but to any uranium enrichment and proliferation activities as well. A Monitoring Mechanism has already been agreed upon by all six parties.

While the Verification Protocol, as currently described, still contains some shortfalls – the requirement for "mutual consent" to examine undeclared suspect sites virtually guarantees future stand-offs – it still provides a level of intrusiveness that few expected would ever be permitted by

Pyongyang. It also focuses on the core security issue: plutonium.

Let's be clear on this point: the essential first step toward eventual denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula is an accurate accounting of North Korea's plutonium holdings. How much plutonium has the North produced and extracted? How much of that was consumed by the October 2006 nuclear test? How much remains on hand? The June declaration allegedly provided some answers – leaks and rumors indicate the North acknowledged having somewhere between 25.5 to 38.5 to 40+ kilograms (with 6-7 kg required for a nuclear weapon) while asserting that roughly 2kg (about half of what had been previously estimated) was used in the North's October 2006 nuclear test – but this has yet to be fully verified.

Back in May, Pyongyang handed over to the U.S. some 18,000 pages of documentation from their nuclear facilities at Yongbyon but actual inspections and sampling are required to verify this data. Presumably this will also require on-site inspection and sampling at North Korea's nuclear test site, which the State Dept. has acknowledged is not on the declared list of facilities. Obtaining "mutual consent" to inspect this facility will be a moment of truth in testing Pyongyang's sincerity.

While an agreed-upon Verification Protocol constitutes a significant breakthrough and vital next step, much remains to be done before the original "Phase Two" of the denuclearization agreement can be considered complete. In return for a million tons of heavy fuel oil (or the equivalent in aid), the North was supposed to accurately account for and then disable "all" its nuclear facilities. The primary U.S. negotiator, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, once famously stated that "all means all," and that meant a full accounting of the North's suspected uranium enrichment and proliferation activities. We now know that the latter two issues were "addressed" (as opposed to explained or revealed) in side notes last June but remain the subject of future negotiation (at a yet to be determined cost).

It is also clear that not all plutonium-related facilities were in the June declaration. In addition to not listing its nuclear test site, there was reportedly no reference to any weapons fabrication facility – experts say the bomb tested in 2006 could not have been manufactured at Yongbyon – or to any weapons or plutonium storage facilities in the June declaration. In short, "all" now apparently means "Yongbyon," which also means that Pyongyang will be asking for more payments to reveal its other plutonium-related facilities, if or when the process ever proceeds that far.

Pyongyang's recent threat to reverse the Yongbyon disablement process has also cast doubt on the extent of this effort. While disablement was supposed to have already been

“more than 90 percent complete” and U.S. officials had been boasting that a resumption of activity at Yongbyon would take “at least a year,” North Korean claims that it could reactive the reprocessing facility at Yongbyon in short order (two-three months) should have the unintended (by North Korea) consequence of increasing demands for greater intrusion and verification of the disablement process now that it has reportedly resumed.

In short, while half a loaf is not as good as a whole one, what is most important is getting the right half. As the administration has long (and rightly) contended, the North’s plutonium holdings remain the key. If the Verification Protocol results in an accurate accounting of Pyongyang’s plutonium stockpile, the other questions can wait until subsequent phases.

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