



The U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework: Is it Still Viable? Is it Enough?

by Ralph A. Cossa

Is The Agreed Framework Between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea still viable? If so, is it sufficient to achieve its stated objectives? Are North Korea missile tests a violation?

The Agreed Framework was signed between the U.S. and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) on October 21, 1994. Its main focus was to freeze and eventually eliminate suspected North Korean nuclear weapons capabilities, to avoid further destabilization on the Peninsula and to prevent the export of nuclear weapons-grade material to rogue states. It was also designed to set the stage for eventual normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations and a resumption of North-South dialogue between Pyongyang and Seoul. Ballistic missiles were not addressed.

Today, despite many challenges, bad behavior, and repeated threats (especially by Pyongyang) to terminate the deal, the Agreed Framework remains in effect. The most recent "moment of truth," the U.S. inspection of the suspect underground facility at Kumchang-ni, failed to provide any evidence that North Korea was not living up to its end of the nuclear bargain.

Nonetheless, critics of the Agreed Framework have become more numerous and additional legitimate questions have been, and do doubt will continue to be raised as to whether North Korea is circumventing the Agreed Framework. In addition, the issues both directly and peripherally related to the Agreed Framework have increased in number and complexity. For example, while there are no references to North Korea missile developments--there had been a conscious decision to handle this as a separate and distinct issue--the U.S. Congress has linked the two by tying future funding for the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO)--the Agreed Framework's implementing mechanism--to "significant progress on reducing and eliminating the North Korean ballistic missile threat."

As a result, even the Agreed Framework's most ardent supporters have grown more cautious and somewhat skeptical, while stressing that it still beats the alternative--a return to the 1994 nuclear stand-off between Washington and Pyongyang.

While the Agreed Framework's death has been frequently proclaimed or predicted, a recent Pacific Forum CSIS study argues that it remains a viable instrument for U.S.-DPRK dialogue and cooperation on nuclear-related issues and a potentially useful vehicle for promoting North-South interaction and understanding. It also concludes that the Agreed Framework,

in and of itself, is not sufficient to fully resolve all nuclear-related issues, much less to bring about lasting peace and security on the Peninsula.

The Agreed Framework has been and can remain a useful element in a broader U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) strategy of engagement with the North. But to do so, the process surrounding the Agreed Framework and other related initiatives requires careful management and effective coordination.

As a result, our study looks at various South Korean and U.S. "package deal" proposals as well as ROK President Kim Dae-jung's overall "Sunshine Policy," and provides an extensive list of policy recommendations aimed at achieving a more coordinated, coherent approach to dealing with North Korea.

The report concludes that, for better or worse, the Agreed Framework remains a key component of current U.S. strategy for peace on the Peninsula, although it is not itself--and should not be confused for--a strategy per se; it is, as it states, only a framework. Further measures and agreements--especially between the two Koreas--will be necessary for any long-term reduction of tensions. But, in the near-term, the importance of the Agreed Framework should not be understated. The inability of the U.S. or ROK to live up to the promises inherent in the Agreed Framework, no less than North Korea's refusal to honor its part of the agreement, could seriously undermine stability on the Peninsula.

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