

A lesson for the Iran deal from the North Korea experience
by Naoko Aoki

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Opponents of the nuclear deal that the United States and other global powers struck with Iran complain that the scope of the agreement is too narrow. The deal, they say, only covers Iran's nuclear activities, ignoring Tehran's other troubling behavior. This is not the first time this logic is being used against a nuclear agreement. It was one of the arguments made against the 1994 Agreed Framework between the US and North Korea. But expanding the goals of that accord came with risks and costs. To avoid similar problems, the US should avoid informally broadening the Iran agreement. Any expansion would have a better chance of acceptance if it goes through a process involving all affected parties.

The Agreed Framework came under attack from the US Congress almost immediately after it was signed in October 1994. Senators criticized the accord for not addressing a variety of non-nuclear issues ranging from North Korea's missile program to terrorist activities to human rights violations. While the administration initially told Congress that the accord would provide an opening to deal with such problems, it could not keep the calls for expanding the deal at bay.

The concerns were first addressed through implementation of the Agreed Framework. While the agreement specified that the United States would reduce barriers to trade and investment within three months of its signing, the US only took modest steps within that deadline. Washington said the rest would depend on Pyongyang's actions on US concerns that went beyond the nuclear problem. Most of the other sanctions on travel, trade, and banking were not lifted until five years later, after progress in bilateral talks on North Korea's missile program. US reluctance to lift sanctions led to Pyongyang's skepticism about US intentions and served as an excuse for North Korea to slow down implementation of its commitments under the agreement.

The narrow focus on nuclear issues was not the only reason for hostility toward the framework. Some Congressional members opposed it because they thought the North Koreans were untrustworthy and would break the accord, while others saw no value in dealing with a regime that they thought would not last. Some critics, meanwhile, used the argument to scuttle a deal they simply did not like.

Congressional opposition meant that the Clinton administration struggled to secure funds for shipments of heavy fuel oil that the US promised to provide North Korea. As a result, shipments were delayed repeatedly. Also under the framework, South Korea and Japan agreed to provide North

Korea with two light-water reactors, which are relatively proliferation-resistant, in exchange for the shutdown of Pyongyang's plutonium-producing graphite-moderated reactor. The implementation of this part of the deal was delayed as well, although mainly due to technical and logistical problems.

The Clinton administration faced increased pressure to deal with North Korea's missile program after the North carried out its first multi-stage missile test in August 1998. In this test, North Korea flew the Taepodong-1 modified as a space launch vehicle over Japan. This unleashed criticism in both the United States and Japan, with legislatures in both countries threatening to cut off funding for the Agreed Framework.

Against this backdrop, the US launched a comprehensive policy review on North Korea led by former Defense Secretary William Perry. The Perry Process tried to stop North Korea's development and testing of long-range missiles, in addition to its nuclear program. As part of the review, Perry institutionalized US policy coordination with Japan and South Korea. Perry visited Pyongyang in 1999, which was followed by North Korean Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok's visit to Washington and Secretary of State Madeline Albright's visit to Pyongyang in 2000. An agreement on North Korea's missile development program appeared close to conclusion. But by then, President Clinton had only had three months remaining in office, and chose to concentrate on the Middle East peace treaty instead of North Korea and the agreement did not materialize. The George W. Bush administration came into office shortly afterward with strong skepticism toward the framework. After intelligence showed the North Koreans were secretly working on a uranium enrichment program – an alternative path to a nuclear bomb – the United States confronted North Korea with the information and the agreement collapsed.

What does this mean for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)? While there are many differences between the two deals, the pressure to widen the scope of the JCPOA has parallels with the Agreed Framework. As in the North Korean case, critics are using the broadening argument to sabotage the agreement. If the accord is to survive, a solution to non-nuclear issues will likely be necessary.

President Donald Trump is among the critics who think the deal negotiated by the Obama administration is too limited in duration and scope. In the past, he has expressed frustration that the deal does not address Iran's missile program, support for terrorist activities, or detention of US citizens. So far, the Trump administration has dealt with Iran's missile programs and other problematic behavior through increased non-nuclear sanctions, while certifying Iran's compliance with JCPOA.

Some criticisms of the deal demand the informal widening of its goals as in the North Korean case. These critics want to reinstate sanctions that were suspended under the JCPOA for non-nuclear-related reasons. This would complicate

implementation of the original deal, just as it did in the North Korean case. North Korea did not walk away from the deal just because the United States refused to lift sanctions without improvement of Pyongyang's non-nuclear behavior. The Iranian reaction may be different.

Other options for the United States include renegotiating the agreement to extend its duration and widen its scope, or seeking a supplemental agreement that would address non-nuclear issues. Iran and the P5+1 negotiating partners are adamantly opposed to renegotiation, while some European nations have indicated they may be willing to consider an additional deal.

In the North Korean case, the Perry Process attempted to supplement the Agreed Framework and revive the momentum for its implementation. While a missile agreement was elusive, it succeeded in bringing together regional allies and many domestic stakeholders in pursuing the same goals. If the scope of the goals of the Iranian deal is to be widened, a similar effort aimed at supplementing the existing accord may be the best bet.

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