



## The Koreas: No Nuke Talks Till 2005?

by Aidan-Foster Carter

There are three problems with the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear issue. First, they risk confusing form with substance: as if merely getting North Korea around a table is success in itself, whether or not real progress is made on the issues. Second, relatedly, there is a tendency – as suspect in diplomacy as in stocks or currencies – to talk the talks up; as in assurances all summer that regular diatribes from Pyongyang didn't actually mean no, so the Sept. 30 deadline set last time for a fourth round could still be met. The third problem is that it wasn't. Talks are better than no talks, and with the U.S. election weeks away it now looks unlikely that there will be any until 2005, when we know who'll be in the White House till 2008. Roh Moo-hyun says there is no need "to rush things"; Kim Jong-il would no doubt agree.

What clinched North Korean resistance, of course, was South Korea's nuclear own goal. Revelations of at least two unauthorized experiments, in 1982 and 2000, gave Pyongyang an excuse that it predictably seized to accuse the U.S. of double standards. But the ripples may yet spread wider. Seoul's account – this was just unauthorized scientists messing about in the lab – does not wholly convince. Significantly, the 1982 news leaked from Washington after the International Atomic Energy Agency new intrusive procedures uncovered the 2000 incident. Remarks (later denied) by former President Kim Young-sam (1993-98) implied the Seoul government may have known. South Korea began a covert bid to build the bomb under Park Chung-hee (1961-79), which the U.S. squashed.

Yet knowledge does not go away; especially given a vast civil nuclear program that generates 40 percent of ROK electric power, and whose vested interests have long urged Seoul to emulate Japan and close its fuel cycle by reprocessing plutonium from spent fuel. Such voices may now be muted. The IAEA, whose inspectors left Seoul Sunday, will have to be seen to probe hard. At the very least, ROK nuclear oversight looks as lax as finance pre-1997. But the logic of the more independent defense that Roh seeks may fuel old fears that, even as an OECD member, South Korea still can't be trusted to play by the global rules. (A respected *Chosun Ilbo* commentator mainly thought it unfair that Seoul got caught.)

Seoul also took a knock from the mushroom cloud mystery that caused brief panic mid-month. It was duff ROK satellites (or analysts) that raised the alarm, over what they now say may simply have been an odd but natural cloud. The same day *The New York Times* had one of its regular DC hawk leaks, warning North Korea may test a bomb. 2+2 made 5; yet there was no seismic or radiation evidence, and a nuclear test so near China's border made no sense. Pyongyang crowed again, claiming it merely blew up a mountain (as you do) for a

hydro-power project that foreign diplomats were duly shown. Trouble is, this was 100 km east of the cloud. Amid rumors that the U.S. was slow to share its own spy pics, Roh's recent trip to Moscow saw reports that Seoul may seek a deal for new satellites from Russia.

Latest on the inscrutable signs front are reports that North Korea may be preparing a missile test. If this were something big – a *Nodong* or *Taepodong* – this would breach a moratorium on testing made several times by the Dear Leader, implying his promises are not worth the paper they are rarely written on. It would also rile Japan, which on Sunday ended its latest talks on kidnaps with no progress – and threatened sanctions if North Korea is not more sincere. For its part, the North Korea party paper *Rodong Shinmun* last week threatened to "turn Japan into a nuclear sea of fire" if the U.S. starts a war. Seoul as usual tried to cool it, saying the signs may just be routine exercises. But on Sunday U.S. Pacific Air Forces commander Gen. Paul Hester said North Korean missiles are a "great concern" and could see "remarkable breakthroughs" in both quantity and precision guidance. Meanwhile declassified U.S. papers show that Pyongyang sought a cool \$3 billion from former U.S. President Bill Clinton just to stop missile sales, while refusing to halt work on development and deployment. This was the deal the incoming Bush rejected. If reelected he will be no more amenable – especially if Colin Powell, whose insistence finally saw the U.S. put forward a detailed nuclear offer at the last six-way talks, is no longer secretary of state.

Finally, there is yet more egg on Seoul's face regarding another oft-neglected corner of North Korea's arsenal of nasties. The ROK Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Energy confirmed on Fri. that 107 tons of sodium cyanide (which can be used to make nerve gas) that an ROK firm illicitly exported to China last year ended up in the North. Earlier, Seoul had managed to stop a similar reshipment from Thailand. While it pledged to tighten controls, simultaneously the ROK is pressing the U.S. to relax the Wassenaar Arrangement, which restricts high-tech and dual-use exports to communist and pariah states, for the Kaesong industrial zone (KIZ) project. The KIZ presses on, despite North Korea's boycott since July of most inter-Korean contact; the first pilot phase is due to start in November and a cross-border shuttle bus now runs from Seoul. Such are Sunshine's contradictions.

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