



Maintaining momentum with North Korea

by Alan D. Romberg

Pyongyang's two-week postponement of the Six-Party Talks may have been designed simply to demonstrate that North Korea will not negotiate "under pressure." In defending the delay, the North cited both the U.S.-ROK Ulchi Focus Lens military exercise that ended Sept. 2 and U.S. appointment of a DPRK human rights coordinator. But the delay may also have reflected a more fundamental decision by the North to stall on dismantling its entire nuclear program, at least as long as the Bush administration remains in place, if not longer. One hopes this is not the case, because, despite U.S. woes from Iraq to New Orleans, it would be very risky for Pyongyang to count on U.S. tolerance of the *status quo* until President Bush leaves office.

Taking the more hopeful view that the North means it when it says it is committed to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and despite failure in the recent round of Six-Party Talks to adopt a "statement of principles" on dismantling the DPRK's nuclear program, agreement is, in fact, within reach. To get there, Pyongyang and Washington both still need to make some difficult decisions.

The North's task is clear. It must move beyond its commitment "in principle" to abandon all nuclear weapons programs and agree to incorporate all existing nuclear activities within the scope of that commitment.

To provide incentives for the North to do that, the U.S. should also bite the bullet on issues over which it has dithered. Given the nature of the North Korean regime, some of these steps are politically distasteful for the Bush administration. But none is impossible and all would serve the overriding U.S. interest in promoting a satisfactory nuclear deal.

- U.S.-DPRK relations will take time to advance to ambassadorial level. However, it would be appropriate to establish some level of diplomatic relations – perhaps liaison offices – as part of a nuclear deal rather than considering this only after a deal is concluded, as has been the U.S. position. Willingness to take this step could not only promote Pyongyang's willingness to abandon its program but it could also enhance U.S. ability both to assess and to influence events in the North.
- Similarly, Washington has not been willing to address permanent peace arrangements to replace the 1953 Armistice until a nuclear deal has been concluded. But completion of complex peace negotiations would likely only come after a nuclear bargain is struck anyway, and delaying their start yields no particular benefit. Moreover, agreement to begin separate discussions now, alongside the Six-Party Talks, could bolster Pyongyang's confidence that, abiding

mutual distrust notwithstanding, the U.S. accepts long-term coexistence and is not merely seeking short-term advantage.

- The U.S. has long committed itself not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states – so-called "negative security assurances." Although the North never received the nuclear weapons-free certification necessary to trigger implementation, that pledge was, in principle, part of the 1994 agreement that froze Pyongyang's plutonium program. It should be renewed now alongside assurances against conventional attack.
- Despite DPRK claims that thousands of U.S. nuclear weapons are deployed in South Korea, none have been there since the early 1990s. Allowing the North to verify that – and the absence of any South Korean nuclear weapons programs – would debunk those charges. Reciprocal inspections of bases and other facilities would raise sensitive security issues, but Washington proposed this during the nuclear negotiations a decade ago, and should do so again.
- Finally, while suspicions of North Korean cheating are fully justified, as long as all current nuclear activities are verifiably dismantled, and Pyongyang attains good standing within the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty – including accepting intrusive international inspections – the U.S. would have no basis for rejecting the North's "right" to peaceful nuclear programs. The North appears to be moving toward a claim to having that "right" now, *a la* India or Pakistan, before it has attained good standing under the NPT. No nation will, or should, support that position. But if acknowledging that "right" prospectively could facilitate dismantlement of the current nuclear program, it would be worthwhile. U.S. cooperation with any specific programs would be a matter for future decision.

If the U.S. adopts these positions, and with South Korea having agreed to supply 2,000 megawatts of energy to replace that foregone with the demise of the light-water reactor project that was under construction in accordance with the 1994 nuclear agreement, North Korea would have no further reason to balk. (Some adjustment in the ROK offer might be needed – perhaps locating the power plant in the DPRK – to ensure the North against a future cut-off.) However, dismantlement must include not only the North's plutonium-based program but also uranium enrichment-related items that were clandestinely procured. The North denies it has an enrichment program, but rarely has the U.S. intelligence and policy community been so united as around the conviction that, whatever its current status, North Korea has acquired materials and technology for uranium enrichment on a production scale.

Just as he acknowledged responsibility for abducting Japanese citizens after years of denial, "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il must take a bold decision now on the nuclear issue. And he must do so in a measurable timeframe if he is to seize

the current opportunity and avoid an inevitable ratcheting up of U.S. pressure with unpredictable, and potentially dangerous, consequences.

But Americans have a responsibility too. Setting aside distaste for the DPRK regime, and adopting pragmatic positions, is a small price to pay for enhancing the prospects of success on this crucial issue.

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