



North Korea Six-Party Talks: A bitter pill to swallow by Scott Snyder

The possible deal between the United States and North Korea, discussed last month in Berlin by Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and his North Korean counterpart, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan, is expected to be ratified at Six-Party Talks later this week in Beijing. If the North freezes but does not dismantle its nuclear program, the threat of another nuclear crisis will persist; to achieve lasting success, all parties to the talks must insist on the irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

In the first phase of the deal, North Korea allegedly will cease operations of its five-megawatt reactor and allow the IAEA to monitor Yongbyon in return for a partial release of North Korean funds from Banco Delta Asia (that have been frozen for over a year), removal from the U.S. terrorism list, and a renewed supply of at least 500,000 tons of oil. This would halt North Korea's ability to produce more plutonium and expand its nuclear weapons arsenal. In return, the North's primary "rewards" would be partial relief from international economic isolation and gains in stature that derive from *de facto* being the world's eighth nuclear weapons state.

A second phase would address North Korea's existing nuclear stockpiles in the context of added economic benefits, steps by the U.S. and Japan toward normalization, and the establishment of a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.

The Bush administration's success requires what most critics believe is impossible: the rollback of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The current deal in its initial stage would not achieve that objective. Instead, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula would require additional actions by North Korea, but financial pressure on the North would be considerably eased, leaving the administration to rely on questionable North Korean assurances that it is committed to the Korean Peninsula's denuclearization.

In many respects, this new deal appears to conform with the North Korean "freeze-for-reward" proposal tabled at the third round of Six-Party Talks in June 2004. This proposal envisaged a limited freeze of North Korea's nuclear program in return for energy supplies and the lifting of U.S. economic sanctions on the DPRK. A statement by the DPRK foreign ministry spokesman advocated a "freeze" as the first step toward dismantlement and characterized the size of the "reward" as the factor that would determine the ultimate timing of North Korea's nuclear dismantlement.

Since then, North Korea has progressively escalated tensions by declaring that it was a nuclear weapons state and calling for "arms reduction talks" in February and March of 2005, then by conducting a nuclear test on Oct. 9, 2006. North Korea's solution was to extract bigger "rewards" by expanding the problem until the U.S. could no longer ignore it.

While North Korea's expectations for rewards increased, its capacity to finance international economic transactions was threatened, first by the freeze of Banco Delta Asia funds and subsequently by Beijing's bilateral measures to remind Pyongyang of its financial dependence on China. Full implementation of sanctions under UN Security Council Resolution 1718 could fundamentally threaten North Korea's economic prospects.

The first phase of the reported "freeze-for-reward" deal would ignore the uranium issue, the immediate cause of the 2002 North Korean nuclear crisis, and leave the North a nuclear state with more plutonium than it had under the Agreed Framework.

It does not prevent Pyongyang from continuing to develop delivery capacity, and it does not roll back North Korea's proven nuclear status. These steps may be irreversible or, if the North determines that it has received insufficient "rewards" they could again restart the nuclear reactor.

If the U.S. and Japan take steps to ease North Korea's isolation, China and South Korea must reinforce the objective of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula by limiting their respective economic interactions with North Korea. Otherwise, if China and South Korea determine that they are satisfied with a freeze and not a rollback of North Korea's nuclear program, North Korea would remain a nuclear weapons state (but with no capacity to produce additional plutonium) while buying time to gain technology necessary to improve design and delivery of a nuclear weapon.

A freeze of North Korea's nuclear program alone in return for easing of financial pressure will relieve tensions and limit North Korea's capacity to proliferate, but at the cost of accepting a nuclear North Korea, a politically unacceptable outcome in both Washington and Tokyo, which would set the stage for another North Korean nuclear crisis.

All parties must remember that while North Korea's nuclear production capacity might be contained, the nuclear crisis itself will remain unresolved until the North fully implements its denuclearization pledges. How the six parties express their resolve in words and actions will be as important as any agreement between Washington and Pyongyang. The parties involved should reaffirm their commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula by strengthening their commitments to enforce the UN Security Council resolutions until the IAEA certifies that North Korea has resumed its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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