

North Korean Nuclear Weapons: How soon an Arsenal?

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Nuclear Weapons

The US has been concerned about North Korea's desire for nuclear weapons and has assessed since the early 1990s that the North has one or possibly two weapons using plutonium it produced prior to 1992.

In 1994, P'yongyang halted production of additional plutonium under the terms of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework.

- We have assessed, however, that despite the freeze at Yongbyon the North has continued its nuclear weapons program.

If the Framework Collapses

If North Korea abandoned the Agreed Framework P'yongyang could resume production of plutonium.

- Reprocessing the spent 5 MWe reactor fuel now in storage at Yongbyon site under IAEA safeguards would recover enough plutonium for several more weapons.
- Restarting the 5 MWe reactor would generate about 6 kg per year.
- The 50 MWe reactor at Yongbyon and the 200 MWe reactor at Taechon would generate about 275 kg per year, although it would take several years to complete construction of these reactors.

Uranium Enrichment

The United States has been suspicious that North Korea has been working on uranium enrichment for several years. However, we did not obtain clear evidence indicating the North had begun constructing a centrifuge facility until recently. We assess that North Korea embarked on the effort to develop a centrifuge-based uranium enrichment program about two years ago.

- Last year the North began seeking centrifuge-related materials in large quantities. It also obtained equipment suitable for use in uranium feed and withdrawal systems.
- We recently learned that the North is constructing a plant that could produce enough weapons-grade uranium for two or more nuclear weapons per year when fully operational -- which could be as soon as mid-decade.
- We continue to monitor and assess the North's nuclear weapons efforts, which given the North's closed society and the obvious covert nature of the program, remains a difficult intelligence collection target.

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