

Policy Forum 08-026: (Maybe) Denuclearizing North Korea

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By Axel Berkofsky

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I. Introduction

Axel Berkofsky, Adjunct Professor at the University Milan and Advisor on Asian Affairs at the European Policy Centre (EPC) in Brussels, notes, "North Korea will not be 'decisive and to try to make a deal with Bush while he is a lame duck... ultimately, the Six-Party talks will break down under a McCain presidency or be replaced by a new process under a Democratic administration.'"

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II. Article by Axel Berkofsky

- "(Maybe) Denuclearizing North Korea"

By Axel Berkofsky

Talking to North Korea about its nuclear program, alleged nuclear proliferation activities and missiles sales to fellow rogue states has never been easy.

However, after 10 weeks and talking *about* rather than *with* each other, Chris Hill, US assistant secretary of state and Washington's chief nuclear negotiator for North Korea, and his counterpart, Kim Kye-gwan, seem to have made a relative breakthrough.

Their meeting in Geneva last Thursday sought to address the numerous obstacles standing in the way of resuming the so-called Six-Party Talks, a multilateral forum established in 2003 with the goal of denuclearizing North Korea.

Of course there have been other "breakthroughs." After a series of talks, various North Korean policy U-turns, missile and nuclear tests, there was a breakthrough of sorts in the Six-Party Talks in February 2007, when Pyongyang signed an agreement with the US, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China to verifiably disable and later dismantle its nuclear facilities.

In October 2007, Pyongyang agreed to declare all its nuclear programs by 31 December 2007 in writing in return for the equivalent of one million tonnes of heavy fuel oil deliveries from the US, Russia, China and South Korea.

The denuclearization process has made (surprisingly) speedy progress in 2007, with Pyongyang closing down its nuclear reactor in Yongbyon and currently (under US and international supervision) in the process of dismantling the reactor.

So far, so good, for the most part.

Also in December 2007, Pyongyang provided the US and the other four members of the Six-Party talks with a list featuring what Pyongyang assured Washington was a complete and accurate report on its nuclear activities.

While Washington complained that the list was "incomplete" and "inaccurate," requesting a revised list by the end of March this year, Pyongyang insists that the list provided is the one and only - end of discussion.

Between the lines

Hill and Kim met in Geneva to talk about that list, Pyongyang's allegedly secret program to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) for weapons purposes, and the suspected transfer of nuclear and missile technology to Syria.

Hill came out of the eight-hour meeting last Thursday saying that "some progress has been made,"

without, however, providing details on the level and substance of the alleged progress.

Kim Kye-gwan stepped in to fill in some of the blanks, pointing out that discussing highly enriched uranium did not belong on the negotiation agenda to start with as far as Pyongyang was concerned.

"There have never been such programs in the past, there are no such things going on currently and [...] we will not engage in them in the future," *Kyodo News* quoted Kim as saying after the Geneva meeting.

While Hill stressed that the meeting was not what he called a "decisional meeting," there might be more to the Geneva talks than meets the eye, argues Chris Nelson, editor of the Nelson Report, a popular daily electronic newsletter briefing on international economic policy issues, foreign and security policy matters.

Even if official US political rhetoric still suggests otherwise, Pyongyang's highly enriched uranium and its ties with Syria are not Washington's priorities, Nelson argues in his 14 March newsletter.

"Is that the real issue? No, say persistent nuclear experts, keep your eye on the weapons grade plutonium generated by Yongbyon, which must be accounted for. That other stuff is 'history' and important to fully account, sure, but not critical to the present task."

A US analyst quoted in the Nelson Report last Friday agrees that Pyongyang's plutonium production is the only real issue as far as Washington is concerned: "What we need to do is focus on what matters for our security, which is not Syria and no longer, we now know, enriched uranium, but plutonium."

The purpose of the declaratory process was clearly stated in the 13 February 2007 joint statement. "It was to discuss with other parties a list of all its nuclear programs as described in the Joint Statement, including plutonium extracted from used fuel rods that would be abandoned pursuant to the Joint Statement," the unnamed analyst wrote.

"The notable thing coming out of Geneva is that Hill has finally made clear that what's in play is a proposal that separates out the sticky issues (Syria/proliferation and uranium enrichment) and puts them onto a separate track, but one that still requires that these issues be fully resolved with the United States."

Easier said than done when dealing with North Korea, which is technically not even obliged to talk about proliferation under the February 2007 agreement, Ralph Cossa, president of the CSIS Pacific Forum in Hawaii, tells ISN Security Watch.

"North Korea's Syria connection is complicated since nothing in the February 2007 declaration says they have to confess past proliferation activities. However, Hill needs something politically although there may be some flexibility on this end," Cossa says.

Indeed, additional flexibility and more importantly the acceleration of the political decision-making process must make it on the US agenda.

Action for action

Some argue that the US is not playing fair, either, failing to remove the DPRK from its list of terrorism-sponsoring countries and sanctions imposed under the Trading with the Enemy Acts.

"Why should we hurry up while the 'action-for-action' principle is not kept?" reads a recent

commentary in Pyongyang's government mouth-piece, the daily *Rodong Shinmun* newspaper. The commentary is referring to Hill's August 2007 promise to take Pyongyang off that list should it give up its nuclear ambitions for good.

That has not happened yet as far as Hill is concerned, but Pyongyang's enthusiasm to resume the Six-Party talks is all the same likely to stand or fall with US willingness to take North Korea off the State Department's list of states sponsoring terrorism.

The last version of the so-called Country Reports on Terrorism was published in April 2006, and, as in the years before, North Korea features prominently in the annual reports serving as the basis for a list of countries subject to US sanctions.

The new report will be published in less in month, but being off that list is not exactly going to turn North Korea into a preferred destination for foreign investors, cautions Peter Hayes, executive director and North Korea expert at the Nautilus Institute in San Francisco.

"North Korea expects manna to flow from heaven when they are removed from the list, but that is very unrealistic," he tells ISN Security Watch. "With the list removed, then it's only their reputation blocking international investors, which means most investors will still stay away due to risk and higher earning potential elsewhere."

The US Congress cannot veto a decision to take Pyongyang off the terror list, but "things could nevertheless get messy should Pyongyang's nuclear program make it onto the political agenda of the US presidential candidates," Cossa fears.

Show us the energy

In phase two (phase one being the provision of verifiable evidence that Pyongyang is actually disabling its nuclear program) of the February 2007 nuclear agreement, North Korea is to receive energy assistance up to the equivalent of 1 million tonnes of heavy fuel oil (HFO).

Energy is badly needed in North Korea, but the devil is as usual in the details, Hayes explains.

"The million tonnes of HFO equivalent are important to the DPRK politically, but not that important energetically and economically. The half that is HFO is not very useful at all, the half that is hardware or heavy fuel equivalent eventually might bring about 800 megawatts [of electricity] back on-line by refurbishing coal mines, transport, grids and generators. That leads perhaps to a 10-15 percent increase in electricity but not before the one-two years it will take to install and make the system work."

Worse, North Korea might not be able to handle the large-scale deliveries of energy, Hayes fears:

"If we get to phase two, the stakes are much bigger energetically and there are serious doubts about DPRK's ability to absorb large-scale energy aid without corresponding changes in its organizational structure and non-energy aspects of its economy."

Wait and see

For its part, South Korea has reportedly adopted a wait-and-see attitude with regard to the Six-Party talks.

Pyongyang's "verifiable and complete de-nuclearization" is the pre-condition for South Korean support for the North, the official line from Seoul goes.

"South Korea's new administration will seek to solve the nuclear issue through Six-Party talks. Unlike the previous two administrations, it will not act without consulting with the US," Yongseong Dong, Research Fellow and leader of Economic Security Team at the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI) in Seoul, tells ISN Security Watch.

Neither is Pyongyang in a rush either to solve the nuclear, uranium enrichment and proliferation issues, satisfied with waiting to see who will take over the White House, the South Korean news agency *Yonhap* reported on 5 March.

"North Korea it is in no hurry to resolve the dispute over its nuclear programs while the current US administration is in office," *Yonhap* quoted a recent article in North Korea's *Rodong Shinmun* .

North Korea will not be "decisive and to try to make a deal with Bush while he is a lame duck," Hayes says, adding that "ultimately, the Six-Party talks will break down under a McCain presidency or be replaced by a new process under a Democratic administration."

The (potentially) good news

Hill, however, is looking ahead and is on stand-by for new talks with his Korean counterparts, while some of his US colleagues remained in Geneva for further contacts with DPRK officials after last week's meeting.

For better or worse, Pyongyang has mastered U-turn diplomacy to perfection in recent years and is almost always good for a security policy surprise.

A pleasant one this time, Chris Hill and his masters in Washington hope.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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