Policy Forum 98-13D: Agreed Framework in Danger of Collapse


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NAPSNet Forum #23 --Future of Agreed Framework

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

FUTURE OF AGREED FRAMEWORK

#23D -- December 22, 1998

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AGREED FRAMEWORK IN DANGER OF COLLAPSE

Essay by Peter Brookes

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I. Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of essays on the current state and future prospects of the 1994 US-DPRK Geneva Agreed Framework. It was written by Peter T.R. Brookes, Senior Advisor for East Asian Affairs with the Republican Staff of the Committee on International Relations in the US House of Representatives. The views expressed here are his own.

Brookes argues that the 1994 Agreed Framework has failed to accomplish its goals of halting the DPRK's nuclear program. He attributes this failure both to flaws in the agreement itself and the DPRK's unwillingness to live up to its side of the bargain. He argues that, unless US concerns about the DPRK's missile program are addressed quickly, the Agreed Framework is in danger of collapse.

II. Essay by Peter Brookes

Regrettably, the Korean peninsula is once again poised on the brink of potential crisis. A little more than four years after signing the US-DPRK Geneva Agreed Framework, the prospects for reducing tensions; finding permanent peace on the peninsula; the development of North-South dialogue; the denuclearization of the peninsula; and the normalization of relations between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea appear beyond attainment. US-DPRK relations are at the crossroads and many are correctly calling for the United States to re-evaluate its policy and its relationship with North Korea.

Many suggest that in light of recent provocative events on the Korean peninsula involving the DPRK, most strikingly the Taepo Dong missile launch over Japan and the revelation of a suspected underground nuclear weapons facility, it is evident that the White House's current policy of accommodation designed to engage and ultimately moderate Pyongyang's international behavior is failing. It appears that Pyongyang believes that it acts in a climate of international impunity. Some, including former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Fred Ikle, have gone so far to as to call US policy towards North Korea, "appeasement."

The American Congress is likewise very troubled about the effectiveness and direction of US policy.

Critics claim that the White House rewards North Korea's bad behavior; encourages brinkmanship by Pyongyang; and that its strategy may be having exactly the opposite effect of what was intended. Current policy, including the Agreed Framework, may actually be leading Washington down the road towards -- and not away from -- confrontation with Pyongyang.

The Administration's central accomplishment, the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, is collapsing because of North Korea's provocative activities. A recently discovered underground construction site may indicate that despite the Agreed Framework, North Korea has an ongoing nuclear weapons program. In fact, given this disturbing evidence, it is possible --perhaps even probable -- that North Korea never intended to curb its nuclear ambitions. This accusation strikes right at the political heart of the Agreed Framework.

Many, of course, question why anybody would believe that North Korea would ever surrender its nuclear weapons program, which it has been working on for almost 30 years and which would greatly increase its bargaining position vis a vis the United States, South Korea, and Japan, for mere heavy fuel oil and two light water reactors. The North Koreans violated the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), to which it was a signatory; why would Pyongyang adhere to the Agreed Framework if they could clandestinely pursue a nuclear weapons program while receiving compensation for ostensibly not doing so?

The general strategic concern about the Agreed Framework is that it has not halted North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The nuclear agreement does address the production of fissile material at the Yongbyon and Taechon facilities, but regrettably does not deal with the weaponization of any fissile material North Korea may have produced prior to the agreement. In addition, the Agreed Framework delays North Korea's compliance with IAEA full-scope safeguards until some time in the future, thereby allowing North Korea to weaponize any fissile material it may have produced as of 1994. The ambiguity written into the Geneva agreement is tacit acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. Most observers see a nuclear North Korea as exactly what the Agreed Framework was designed to prevent. These questions and assertions put the Agreed Framework in doubt now more than ever.

It was shortsighted and naive for the Clinton Administration to base its strategy on the assumption that all its policy needed to do was to temporize the situation until the North Korean regime collapsed. The idea was to buy time, assuming that the DPRK wouldn't last much longer and that it was a risk worth taking. But the danger in filibustering was that it was the North Koreans who were buying time, taking advantage of America's generosity while they recovered politically and economically and pursued their nuclear ambitions. The question still lingers-who was stringing whom along?

The Agreed Framework is at a critical juncture. The suspicions about North Korea's adherence to the nuclear agreement and the agreement's ability to curb Pyongyang's nuclear program have called into question the utility and future viability of the Geneva accord. The assertion that North Korea may be carrying on a covert nuclear weapons program in a large facility at Kumchang-ni has seriously undermined political and moral support for the nuclear agreement and for a further normalization of relations with Pyongyang. The situation begs the question, "Can Pyongyang be trusted?" The ongoing negotiations over access to the site, if unsuccessful, could result in the implosion of the agreement; a significant downturn in relations; and the precipitation of a major security crisis in the region.

To many on Capitol Hill, the Administration has oversold the agenda of the Agreed Framework as a

program that would successfully address the North Korea nuclear problem. Moreover, the Administration has been disingenuous about what the Agreed Framework can and cannot achieve--or at a minimum the message on the Hill has mutated over time. The recent crisis has publicly exposed the flaws of the Geneva accord and thrown into question its future as an agreement that can arrest Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

This dilemma is further exacerbated by North Korea's robust ballistic missile capability -- which is likely coupled with its nuclear program. How successful will history judge the Agreed Framework after North Korea is able to place a nuclear warhead atop an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking the United States? This is a very serious question.

The Agreed Framework has deficiencies. If the agreement is to continue to be considered viable, modalities of verification must be found. There must be a means to gain access to other suspected nuclear sites prohibited under the Agreed Framework as well -- within reason-- if this agreement is to survive politically and practically as an arms control accord.

Finally, the Agreed Framework does not exist in isolation. As much as some would like it to, it does not. It is but one component of the US-DPRK relationship, and although it is directed towards North Korea's nuclear program exclusively, events such as a missile firing have an effect on it. For example, the bellicose and highly provocative rhetoric against the United States which comes forth daily from North Korea's official news agency KCNA; the development, testing and proliferation of long range ballistic missiles; and continued hostile infiltrations into South Korea undermine all agreements with Pyongyang -- the Agreed Framework being no exception. Continued militant acts by the North Koreans will negatively affect all aspects of the relationship -- from food aid to the nuclear accord.

US policy towards North Korea is at the crossroads. The Agreed Framework is in political peril due to its own shortcomings; possible North Korean disregard for its provisions; and Pyongyang's international behavior. North Korea must refrain from turning opportunities for cooperation into crises.

If the dangers of miscalculation and renewed confrontation are to be avoided, and the Agreed Framework preserved, US concerns about North Korea's nuclear intentions must be addressed directly, quickly, and satisfactorily. If they are not, congressional and American public support for the Agreed Framework and relations with North Korea will vanish.

III. NAPSNet 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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