Will the South’s Uranium Enrichment Test Affect the North Korean Nuclear Issue?

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Special Report: September 9, 2004

by Cheong Wook-Sik

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I. Introduction

The following is a paper by Cheong Wook-Sik, representative of the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea. Cheong Wook-Sik writes, "in a situation in which finding a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue has been difficult enough, it seems clear that with the appearance of the South Korean uranium enrichment issue, the six-party talks have run into yet another potential problem. There is room, however, to turn this misfortune into a blessing."

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II. Statement by Cheong Wook-Sik

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With not even the start to a solution of the issue of North Korea's secret nuclear program using enriched uranium in sight, controversy is blowing over the revelation that South Korea conducted a uranium enrichment experiment four years ago. In particular, when one considers the point that the U.S. has applied the nuclear non-proliferation regime it has led discriminately according to how friendly the nation in question is with Washington, the incident may very well lead to controversy over the equality of the non-proliferation regime.

The government is trying to put out the flames, stressing that the uranium enrichment was conducted as an experiment and resulted in no more than 0.2 grams of enriched uranium, the was disassembled right after the experiment, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is now conducting inspections in accordance with additional safeguard protocols.

One could see the incident, however, as a violation of the Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula that banned the possession of uranium enrichment facilities, and there are some grounds to argue that as IAEA was informed after the experiment had been conducted and not beforehand, the incident might represent a violation of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

No reason for concern: U.S.

About this incident, the U.S. government, which has led the non-proliferation regime, said that while the experiment should not have taken place, considering the South Korean government's total cooperation -- Seoul willingly informed the IAEA and voluntarily submitted to inspections -- it was a good example of compliance with NPT duties and there was no need for further concern.

The United States, through a briefing by State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher on Thursday, said there was nothing particularly problematic, stressing that the amount of uranium enriched by South Korea was less than that enriched by North Korea and Iran, South Korea was actively cooperating with IAEA inspections, and the enrichment facilities had been disassembled. At the same time, he said the U.S. and other NPT member states would make a decision and take appropriate measures when the IAEA inspection team reports to the IAEA Board of Directors following the completion of its inspections.

Asked if the issue would have a negative influence on U.S. nuclear diplomacy with North Korea, Boucher said he would not make that conclusion, and stressed that it did not appear the incident would influence the six-party talks. Nor should it, he added.

Even if there are differences in degree and level, however, both North and South Korea have now been caught up in suspicions concerning uranium enrichment, and one cannot exclude the possibility of this having a significant affect on the North Korean nuclear issue. To refer back, in October 2002, the U.S. claimed that North Korea was secretly using uranium enrichment technology in an attempt to manufacture nuclear weapons, and therefore was in violation of the Geneva Agreement, Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and NPT. With this, the "Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis" commenced.

Accordingly, attention is focusing on North Korea's reaction to South Korea's uranium enrichment. In the event that North Korea makes an issue of the incident, accusing the U.S. of double standards, the North Korean nuclear issue would inevitably become more entangled. This is because North

Korea could make fairness an issue and use it to pressure the U.S. and South Korea.

Because North Korea has itself been claiming that the Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and Geneva Agreement have been virtually abrogated, however, it has scanty ground to criticize South Korea. Accordingly, Pyongyang is expected to immerse itself in criticizing U.S. double standards rather than South Korea's uranium enrichment experiment itself.

R&D -- a solution to Korean uranium enrichment suspicions? Even if this isn't the case, in a situation in which finding a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue has been difficult enough, it seems clear that with the appearance of the South Korean uranium enrichment issue, the six-party talks have run into yet another potential problem. There is room, however, to turn this misfortune into a blessing.

As is well known, the suspicion that North Korea possesses a uranium enrichment program was what started the second North Korean nuclear crisis and has been one of the biggest difficulties in finding a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. The U.S. is claiming that it is clear North Korea possesses a uranium enrichment program and that Pyongyang itself has admitted such, while North Korea is retorting that such claims are U.S. fabrications.

In this vortex, the U.S. has been driving home that unless North Korea admits to its uranium enrichment program and promised to abandon it, there would be no progress in negotiations over the North Korean nuclear issue. No matter how you cut it, the point is that if suspicions concerning North Korea's uranium enrichment were not alleviated, it would be difficult to expect progress in solving the North Korean nuclear issue.

Accordingly, in order to solve this problem, one needs to find a "clever plan" that would allow both the U.S. and North Korea to save face while minimizing suspicions over North Korea's uranium enrichment activities. This "clever plan" could begin with North Korea arguing -- much along the same lines as South Korea did with its uranium enrichment experiment -- that it attempted to enrich uranium as part of research and development (R&D).

If North Korea approaches suspicions surrounding uranium enrichment in the context of R&D, ground would appear for it to claim that since it attempted to acquire uranium enrichment technology as part of its "peaceful nuclear activities," those attempts had nothing to do with the manufacture of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, from the U.S. position, Washington could claim that since North Korea did attempt to possess uranium enrichment technology, U.S. assertions were not incorrect.

In fact, it is hard to conclude whether attempts to enrich uranium at the level of R&D constitute a violation of international treaties and responsibilities. South Korea, too, is claiming that since its uranium enrichment took place at the R&D level, it did not constitute a violation of the NPT, and the U.S. has been claiming that its development of "earth penetrator" nuclear weapons did not violate the NPT because it was conducted at the level of R&D. Moreover, the NPT does not forbid the possession of reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities in and of themselves, and neither the Geneva Agreement nor the Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula forbids uranium enrichment for R&D purposes.

As uranium enrichment technology is fundamentally "dual use," one could say the above proposition is even more realistic. If one enriches uranium 235 more than 90 percent, one could use it to manufacture nuclear weapons, while low-enriched uranium (enriched less than 20 percent) could be used as fuel in nuclear reactors. Moreover, low-enriched uranium could be used for agricultural and medical purposes.

Accordingly, if North Korea proposes that it tried to acquire uranium enrichment technology in order to make fuel rods for later use in its nuclear reactors -- in the same way that South Korea explained that its uranium enrichment experiment occurred at the level of R&D in order to acquire technology to produce nuclear fuel rods -- it could lead to an unexpected breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear issue.

With this approach in the background, the South Korean government must concentrate its diplomatic force on a) getting North Korea to commence discussions with the IAEA in order to minimize suspicions over its uranium enrichment activities; and b) getting the U.S. to execute in earnest North Korea's "freeze with compensation" proposal simultaneous to those discussions.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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