



North Korea: Again

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My first reaction upon hearing that North Korea had agreed to take steps toward nuclear disarmament was: not again! Hadn't Pyongyang promised Jimmy Carter, during his ill-advised 1994 "peace" mission, that it would freeze its nuclear weapons program and dismantle existing nuclear facilities? Didn't North Korea break that promise? In 2000, hadn't Secretary of State Madeleine Albright toasted the "dear leader" Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang only to be disappointed later when his duplicity was again revealed? When will these people realize that communists lie?

Now comes the Bush administration's announcement of what appears - appears - to be a breakthrough. This time things might - might - be different, especially because the initial agreement does not rely solely on Kim's word or on U.S. pressure.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il (C) visits a power plant in Hamgyong-pukdo in northern North Korea in this undated photo released by the Korea Central News Agency on February 8, 2007. JAPAN OUT REUTERS/Korea News Service (North Korea)

As outlined to me in a telephone conversation with Deputy National Security Adviser J.D. Crouch, this agreement is the result of pressure exerted by five countries - the United States, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea - something critics said would never happen. Critics said that Kim would never agree to six-party talks and that the Bush administration was making a big mistake in not accepting Kim's demand for bilateral negotiations. President Bush held out and, so far, his strategy seems to be working.

Crouch says the Chinese government deserves credit for pressuring Pyongyang to reach an agreement on its nuclear weapons. And he tells me that in order to get the energy, humanitarian and other economic aid that has been promised, North Korea must comply with a two-phase process that will be monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). According to Crouch, North Korea will get an initial tranche of emergency humanitarian and energy aid up-front, but they will not get the remainder unless they fully declare and disable their nuclear programs, including uranium enrichment. Phase one will take place over the next 60 days. North Korea has agreed to stop the operation of and seal its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, stop the operation of and seal their plutonium reprocessing facilities and allow the IAEA to come back into those facilities to verify those actions. Additionally, North Korea has agreed to do an initial accounting of its nuclear program. In exchange for honoring those promises, North Korea will receive about 5 percent of the energy aid promised to them. That amounts to 50,000 tons of a promised aid package that is equivalent to 1 million tons of heavy fuel oil.

Phase two leads to the disablement of North Korean nuclear facilities, which, says Crouch, goes beyond anything envisioned during the Clinton administration. The benefit of disablement, he says, is that "it would take them a lot of time and cost them a lot of money to bring those facilities back to where they would be useful again."

As part of the agreement, North Korea is also required to account for all nuclear weapons, which they must dismantle, and take inventory of its plutonium stockpile, which is something else the Clinton administration was unable to achieve.

Incentives for North Korea to live up to its promises include: refusal by the co-signing nations to deliver the promised energy, if there is no compliance, keeping the U.N. sanctions in place until there is full compliance and the continued use of financial levers that have prompted the Treasury Department to pressure governments not to do business with North Korea, pressure that has apparently worked, says Crouch.

Much remains to be worked out in the various "working groups" before this deal is final, but the Bush administration is guardedly optimistic that the conditions point to a greater likelihood of compliance by North Korea than with previous agreements, which were being violated even as they were written.

John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, is skeptical about the agreement. He told Bill Gertz of The Washington Times that the deal rewards "bad behavior" by North Korea and sends a "bad signal" to Iran.

Bolton could be right, but if the agreement works, the threat from a major player in "the axis of evil" will have been substantially reduced. In an increasingly troubled and chaotic world, that is one blessing for which everyone will be grateful.

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