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North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Prospects for Resolution

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When trying to assess what the prospects are for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis, the desired outcome from the point of view of the United States and the wider international community can be stated easily: the elimination of North-Korean nuclear programmes, facilities and weapons in a verifiable and irreversible way. As Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill declared, “We will not live with a nuclear North Korea.” But can we tell Pyongyang’s aim so easily as well? To DPRK, the nuclear weapon serves as a safeguard for the regime against an attack from outside, a tool to make the country relevant and able to seek assistance – so to say – from the position of strength. Finally, for the internal consumption, it is a rare sign of the leadership’s success and achievement within an otherwise dismal performance.

Pyongyang, therefore, must be looking for a result that would guarantee its due recognition, security and continuation of the political system together with considerable economic assets. It is understood that the price Pyongyang would require for relinquishing its nuclear programme contain full relations with US, security guarantees, massive economic assistance and light-water reactors. The question remains, if the decision to really give up all nuclear facilities including its weapons will ever be taken. Given the history of the previous nuclear deal with the US, the Agreed Framework of 1994, as well as the fact there is no precedent of a nuclear country willingly abandoning its nuclear arsenal, a positive reply seems rather unlikely at the moment. The occasional assertion of North Korean representatives that it was President Kim Il Sung’s wish to have a nuclear-free Peninsula may well serve their domestic purposes but can hardly be accepted as a conclusive evidence of political intentions.



The sceptical assessment of a possible decision by Kim Jong Il to give up all nuclear facilities, materials and weapons need not mean the process of North Korean denuclearization is likely to stall completely. It is very probable, though, that it will move ahead with delays and disputes about what the real meaning of specific obligations is and how the agreed terms are to be understood and implemented. It is likely, too, that the complete denuclearization will not be achieved and that we will have to “live with a nuclear North Korea” for years to come.

Joint statement of the Six Party Talks of 19th September 2005 remains the basis of the denuclearization process, obliging Pyongyang to abandon all nuclear weapons and programs for the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The principal of “action for action” adopted there, serves as a tool to overcome the fundamental mistrust between the US and North Korea: the former highly suspicious of Pyongyang after its breach of the 1994 Framework Agreement, the latter apprehensive of real American intentions regarding the future of Kim Jong Il’s regime.

Subsequent escalation leading to the nuclear test in October 2006 did not look exactly as the type of “action for action” envisaged by the joint statement. Soon after, however, a policy change of the White House led to the February 2007 agreement outlining a 60-days “phase one” action plan. Its implementation took actually four months and resulted in the shutting down of Yongbyon nuclear facility and providing Pyongyang with the initial 50 000 tons of heavy fuel oil. The October 2007 agreement stipulated the disablement of three main facilities in Yongbyon and submitting a declaration of all nuclear programs by year’s end. By now, three principal facilities in Yongbyon are 80 % disabled and restarting them would require about a year, according to American specialists. The declaration was finally submitted with a six-month delay by the end of June and United States started the procedure to delete North Korea from the list of terrorism sponsoring countries and those subject to the Trading with the Enemy Act.

The undisputed tangible result of the denuclearization process has been so far the termination of plutonium production and a substantial disablement of the facility which during the Clinton administration had been only mothballed and later restarted again. This is the “half-full glass”



interpretation. The “half-empty” view regards Yongbyon as a “large collection of rusty equipment” (A. Lankov) with a limited practical use that could have been easily sacrificed. The current stock of plutonium is fully sufficient for the regime survival and its political and negotiation purposes.

Other results are to be seen after the comprehensive declaration will have been analyzed. The lack of agreement on the verification mechanism suggests there will be problems since the very beginning of this phase. It confirms, too, that doubts about North Korea’s intention to denuclearize are well justified. In case this obstacle is overcome, it’s a safe bet that another one will appear on the table soon, in the form of the requirement of a light water reactor to be delivered to Pyongyang. The Six-Party Talks are neither going to bring an early solution nor a clear-cut solution. Several years of denuclearizing effort are likely to follow, through which North Korea is expected to carefully calculate whether or not it is worth to continue the process. The course of action does not look efficient, yet no other has worked better so far.

