

North Korea: This Deal Isn't Done Yet

The country's agreement on principle to give up nuclear weapons is important, but big divisions remain, so the devil will be in the details. Experts aren't sure a lasting formula will be found to resolve the nuclear crisis. "A long, rugged road awaits, and there are so many mines on the way that no one knows when one of them will explode," warns Song Young Dae, a former Unification Vice-Minister in Seoul who had long handled North Korea issues.

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To many North Korea watchers in Seoul, it was a U-turn made by the U.S. -- not by the unpredictable regime in Pyongyang -- that enabled a surprising deal on Sept. 19 aimed at eliminating North Korea's nuclear arsenal. And the accord reached in Beijing among six nations -- including China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea -- wasn't the breakthrough many depicted.

Indeed, the euphoria over détente was short-lived as Pyongyang resorted to its customary hard line within 24 hours, declaring that it would not give up its weapons until it received a light-water reactor. But the pact wasn't a disaster, either.

RUGGED ROAD. The reason: The deal covered only principles and goals, with all major differences over details left for future wrangling. "The arrangement relied on creative ambiguity," says Kim Sung Han, a U.S. expert in South Korea's Institute of Foreign Affairs & National Security, a government think tank. That allowed differing parties to sign a joint statement but set the stage for "ugly confrontations" when they resume negotiations in November.

So does the Sept. 19 pact improve chances of defusing the crisis? North Korea watchers think so, particularly because they see a major policy shift on the part of the Bush Administration. "The Beijing arrangement has underscored flexibility on the part of the U.S.," says Dong Yong Sueng, head of the Economic Security Team at Samsung Economic Research Institute. With Bush's weakened political position making it hard for him to have another major face-off on top of the mess in Iraq and the Katrina cleanup, his foreign-policy team has stopped imposing terms and is willing to negotiate.

RULED OUT. Indeed, the U.S. accepted terms Bush had long called unacceptable. They include the respect of Pyongyang's "right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy, future discussion of the provision of light-water reactor," and phased-in economic benefits before the North eliminates all its nukes. Among other concessions were an assurance by Washington that it won't attack North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons, a promise to respect Pyongyang's sovereignty, and a willingness to provide energy assistance as well as take steps to normalize ties.

The compromises, however, don't undermine the U.S. goal of verifiably removing nuclear arms in North Korea as long as agreed-upon principles are observed. Pyongyang pledged to abandon all its nuclear-weapons programs, return soon to the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, and allow U.N. inspectors to come in.

The real significance of the Beijing deal is the commitment by the six parties to resolve wide differences through diplomatic means. Unless North Korean leader Kim Jong Il ditches the principles laid down, the U.S. would have to rule out a military option and international sanctions further isolating Pyongyang, which is already reeling from rusting industry and hunger affecting millions of people. "We have six countries all in the same boat, and the one jumping off the boat will be the loser. North Korea won't commit that blunder," predicts chief South Korean negotiator Song Min Soon.

PEACE DIVIDEND. Among the participants, China, the host country, comes out the clear winner. By pushing to the future resolution of sticking points -- mainly the scope of international inspection and sequencing steps for implementing agreed principles -- Beijing kept the momentum of the talks going, despite gaping differences. It also displayed an ability to work productively with the U.S. and reduce tensions in Northeast Asia by bringing Pyongyang back in from the cold into a multilateral accord.

Other parties will also benefit from the Beijing deal. Russia wins recognition as a major player in deciding the fate of security in the region, while both Japan and South Korea could reap peace dividends. The pact would stop North Korea from testing threatening missiles over the Sea of Japan (also called the East Sea) and from accumulating more plutonium to increase its nuclear arsenal. It also paves the way for Japan to negotiate normalizing relations with North Korea and for South Korea to push ahead with bilateral economic cooperation.

The question remains if the Beijing-hosted talks will produce a better solution than the 1994 Agreed Framework between the U.S. and North Korea. President Bush's critics accuse him of giving Kim Jong Il more time to build bombs by discarding in 2002 the 1994 accord on the grounds that Pyongyang undertook a secret uranium-enrichment program. In response, Pyongyang withdrew from the NPT and expelled U.S. inspectors.

"If all the principles [agreed in Beijing] are honored and implemented, then it certainly will be a more comprehensive deal than the Agreed Framework, as it covers all existing nuclear programs," says Kim Tae Woo, a nuclear expert at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, a think tank for the South Korean Defense Ministry.

PLAYING HARDBALL. No one, however, is under any illusions about the difficulties that lie ahead. The more the U.S. and North Korea get into discussing concrete steps and sequencing them, the more difficult it will become because few of the fundamental differences appeared to have been bridged.

The daunting task was heralded by confusion sowed when Pyongyang vowed on Sept. 20 that it will keep its weapons until Washington provides it with light-water civilian reactors. A senior North Korean official later backed down from the threats, saying it's a matter for negotiation. Even Christopher Hill, the chief U.S. envoy to the talks, acknowledged that dismantling nuclear facilities in North Korea could take years.

The hope is that both North Korea and the U.S. learned the futility of playing hardball. "Certainly we'll witness a time-consuming process and a period of confrontation and political brinkmanship, but as long as the spirit of flexibility is maintained, a package deal could eventually be reached," says Paik Hak Soon, a North Korea expert at independent security think tank Sejong Institute, near Seoul.

The military option of regime change no longer seems to be in Bush's cards. The persistent troubles in Iraq -- which after all stem from a military campaign whose rationale involved weapons of mass destruction that were never found -- scuttled Washington's hopes of scaring North Korea and Iran from their nuclear ambitions. If the six nations manage to negotiate a solution to the North Korean standoff, it could serve as a model to ease the deadlock with Iran.

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