

Resolving the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The first step has been taken towards a resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, the 23–25 April trilateral negotiations held in Beijing, involving the United States, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and China may have raised as many questions as provided answers.

Why did Both Sides Agree to Talk?

The stalemated position on the framework of negotiations has ended. The US previously refused bilateral talks, insisting on a multilateral setting involving at least China, South Korea and Japan, and preferably Australia and the EU. The DPRK has previously steadfastly insisted on bilateral US–DPRK talks. Talks 'hosted' by China were a compromise by both sides.

Factors bringing the DPRK to the table are likely to have included increased pressure by China and perhaps the sight of Iraq's rapid capitulation. The holding of the talks in Beijing at the height of the SARS outbreak would also have been warmly welcomed by China as it becomes increasingly isolated by the infectious outbreak. The US on the other hand sought negotiations to alleviate the strain placed on its regional alliances by refusing bilateral negotiations.

Has the DPRK Started Reprocessing Spent Fuel Rods?

On 18 April, just one week before the negotiations, the Korea Central News Agency, the official voice of the DPRK, published an English language statement by a Foreign

Ministry spokesperson declaring the DPRK to be 'in progress' of reprocessing spent fuel rods—a process which would enable the production of adequate nuclear material for the production of 5 or 6 nuclear weapons in two to three months.

A subsequent correction of the English language version of the statement on 21 April shifted the emphasis to 'progress towards'. This is backed up by US scientific data that has not revealed any evidence of fuel rod reprocessing, which gives off distinct atmospheric and thermal signatures able to be readily detected remotely. However, the first statement, and even the second statement increased the level of 'nuclear ambiguity' created by the DPRK.¹ This 'ambiguity' has been reflected in the Bush administration's decision to order an intelligence review as to whether the DPRK could produce weapons grade plutonium undetected.

Does the DPRK have Nuclear Weapons?

Previous US intelligence estimates have cited the DPRK as being in possession of one or two nuclear devices. According to the US, during the three-day talks in Beijing the DPRK admitted to having nuclear weapons and being prepared to either use them or export them, depending on US behaviour.

Both China and the DPRK have refuted the claim, China stating that according to its information no such admission took place.² The DPRK however has remained ambiguous in its denials, maintaining in its often

flamboyant commentary that it holds a 'physical deterrent force strong enough to wipe out any aggressors at a single stroke'.³

What does the DPRK Really Want?

The intentions of the DPRK remain opaque. The ambiguity of both its actions and intentions make negotiations extremely difficult. Four scenarios are explored here:

- Scared by the stunning military success of the US in Iraq, and its gradual abandonment by China (both economically and politically in the recent crisis), the DPRK may currently see possession of a nuclear defence as essential to the regime's survival.

Whereas during the 1994 nuclear crisis, in which under the Agreed Framework, it agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear program in exchange for economic and political concessions, today the evidence of Iraq has negated the viability of this option. As stated by the Korea Central News Agency 'the Iraqi war proved that [UN or International Atomic Energy Agency] inspection is a prelude to a war'.⁴

- With the same methodology as in the 1994 crisis, but under more favourable international circumstances,⁵ the DPRK is seeking to maximise economic benefit through the dismantlement of its nuclear program.

Their key aims are the maintenance of regime security, which requires a comprehensive non-aggression pact, and economic security, which requires immediate and long-term energy assistance, the removal of trade restrictions, diplomatic recognition, and the removal from the terrorist list, thus allowing access to World Bank and IMF assistance.

- In a combination of the above two scenarios, the DPRK may want 'to have its cake and eat it too'. By making increasingly open statements about its nuclear intentions the DPRK may be preparing the path towards becoming a recognised nuclear state. This would require maintaining a strong and effective relationship with South Korea and Japan, thus both avoiding the likelihood of their support for a coordinated US response and increasing economic benefits accrued through trade.

However, China, the DPRK's strongest supporter and currently essential economic lifeline, has strongly opposed nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, bringing with it the possible demons of Japanese rearmament, a US missile shield encompassing the region and possibly even US troops at its border.

- There is the remote possibility that, there is disagreement within the DPRK leadership structure on how to achieve the greatest benefit from the current situation.

While the image of Kim Jong-Il remains an obtrusive figurehead of the nation, his ascension to leadership as chairman of the National Defence Commission, the supreme commander of the people's army, with little formal military training may have caused resentment in the older military establishment, despite his eager pursuit of the 'military first' ideological movement. This

could explain the often competing actions and statements regarding the nuclear crisis between those thought to be supporting a more bellicose stance and those supporting greater reform and openness.

How does this Affect North–South Relations?

Despite the DPRK's reported nuclear admissions, North–South relations are continuing in relative strength compared to what was imaginable before the June 2000 leader's summit between Kim Jong-Il and then South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung.

The 10th ministerial level talks between the DPRK and South Korea, (Republic of Korea, ROK), took place 27–30 April. The talks resulted in agreements to hold:

- the 7th reunion of separated families in June
- a joint ceremony celebrating the 15 June (Leader's Summit) anniversary
- the 5th Inter-Korean economic cooperation promotion committee in May
- the 11th inter-Korean ministerial talks on 9–14 July in Seoul.

In addition the two sides agreed to discuss the nuclear issue in the future. The ROK chief delegate at the meeting also stated that the DPRK 'did not object strongly' to the inclusion of the ROK in future multilateral talks on the nuclear issue.

However, a key failure of the meeting was the inability of the two sides to agree to make reference to the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in any joint statement on the ministerial talks.

Conclusion

The first official meeting between the US and the DPRK since the start of the crisis in October 2002 is a momentous achievement in itself. While both sides have stated the

impossibility of future talks without a change in position by the other, there is a firm desire by both sides to go forward, demonstrated by the US decision to ignore earlier DPRK statements on reprocessing, and the DPRK's commitment to maintaining its 'nuclear ambiguity', thus enhancing its bargaining power.

1. 'Nuclear ambiguity'—not allowing confirmation of the possession of nuclear weapons—maximises DPRK's bargaining power. By confirming the possession of nuclear weapons the DPRK would invite a hardline response, and closer cohesion between the US and its allies South Korea and Japan. By confirming it has no nuclear weapons, through IAEA verification, the DPRK would gain less economic benefits and may even invite further strategic neglect, isolation and regime change.
2. According to the US, the exchange during which the DPRK admitted possession took place in the corridor, outside formal negotiations.
3. KCNA, 'KCNA on recent DPRK–US talks', 30 April 2003
4. *ibid.*
5. Through a variety of factors the US is more isolated in its determination to pressure the DPRK, with South Korea and Japan (cautiously) pursuing more independent courses of reconciliation.

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