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## RESOLVING THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE

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The talks between the United States and North Korea in Beijing ended abruptly last week after North Korean officials declared that North Korea possesses a nuclear arsenal. As the Bush Administration continues to formulate a peaceful resolution to the nuclear standoff with North Korea, it should keep in mind that its principled policy of refusing to succumb to blackmail and pursuing a multilateral approach has been, and will continue to be, the best course of action.

Although North Korea's admission seemed shocking, in reality it only confirmed what the international community has long suspected: The North Korean regime has flagrantly violated four international agreements and developed nuclear weapons. While these initial meetings did not produce any tangible results, the United States should view them as the first step in a process of aligning the interests of regional players to denuclearize North Korea peacefully.

The Bush Administration should not rule out the possibility of future talks with North Korea, as long as they are continued within a multilateral setting and the goals are well coordinated among the allies. Future talks should test whether or not Pyongyang is sincerely willing to dismantle its nuclear weapons program, recognizing that if it does so, assistance from the international community will follow. The United States should also continue to internationalize the problem by engaging the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), China, and Russia.

**Recent North Korean Actions.** The Beijing talks were the first between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) since October 2002, when North Korea admitted to conducting a major clandestine nuclear weapons development program. This program

clearly violated both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the 1994 Agreed Framework, which called for North Korea to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for two civilian light-water nuclear reactors and heavy fuel oil. North Korea then violated the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the International Atomic Energy Agency Safeguards Agreement by reactivating its plutonium facility in Yongbyon and expelling IAEA monitors.

Since initiating these provocative actions, North Korea has consistently demanded face-to-face meetings with the United States, despite the Bush Administration's position that it would address North Korea only within a multilateral setting. Then, in an about-face, North Korea agreed to meet with the United States in a multilateral forum.

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U.S. insistence on a multilateral resolution to North Korea's nuclear proliferation is a necessity because it is *not* a bilateral issue; North Korea's provocations threaten the stability of not only the region, but indeed the entire global community. Moreover, any framework to address the North's nuclear program will require, at a minimum, the participation and cooperation of North Korea's regional neighbors to ensure Pyongyang's compliance.

**Goals for the Bush Administration.** As the Bush Administration formulates the next steps to end the nuclear standoff with North Korea, it should consider the following actions to achieve the immediate goal: convincing North Korea that it must cease its nuclear programs, including both its plutonium-based weapons program in Yongbyon and its clandestine, highly enriched uranium program.

- **Engage in active shuttle diplomacy with regional players to coordinate strategy.** Although South Korea, Japan, and Russia—the other major regional powers with direct interests in resolving the nuclear issue—were not present at the meetings in Beijing, each country has some influence with North Korea. Thus, the Bush Administration should seek their support in coordinating pressure on North Korea. The Administration should also coordinate with other allies, such as Australia, Canada, and members of the European Union, that have diplomatic relations with North Korea, encouraging them to base their relations with Pyongyang on the status of its nuclear programs.
- **Work with regional players to establish future meetings.** South Korean officials are scheduled to meet with their North Korean counterparts in Pyongyang this week. The U.S. should encourage such meetings and use them to establish the channels of communication for future multilateral interactions between the U.S. and North Korea. South Korea should insist that North Korea abandon its nuclear programs.

- **Expand future talks to include the active participation of South Korea, Japan, and Russia.** The United States should make clear to North Korea and China that any permanent solution must include the active participation of the other key regional players. This is critical not only because these countries must play a crucial role in overseeing North Korea's denuclearization, but also because North Korea's strategy has long been to divide the interests of America and its allies, South Korea and Japan. Furthermore, no country has a greater interest in a peaceful resolution to tensions on the Korean peninsula than South Korea, and it must play a central role in any solution that promotes stability on the peninsula.
- **Seek a United Nations resolution that condemns North Korea's violation of previous U.N. agreements** and urges North Korea's compliance by returning to the NPT and abiding by IAEA safeguards, verifiably ceasing plutonium reprocessing at the Yongbyon facility, and ending the highly enriched uranium nuclear programs.

**Conclusion.** Last week's meetings in Beijing are an important, but preliminary, step toward resolving North Korea's nuclear problem peacefully. The United States should approach the road ahead with cautious optimism, keeping expectations modest.

If history is any predictor, North Korea will continue to act provocatively while simultaneously making conciliatory gestures designed to divide Washington from Seoul and Tokyo. Such behavior by Pyongyang is to be expected, but observers should not use the North's recalcitrance as the short-term measure of the Bush Administration's steadfast approach to North Korea. Regardless of Pyongyang's machinations to obfuscate and confuse the issues, the Bush Administration should remain focused on the long-term goal of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in the region.

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