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Limited Progress on North Korean Denuclearization: Critical Questions Lie Ahead

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Pyongyang's June 26 delivery of a data declaration regarding its nuclear weapons programs and the anticipated destruction of the cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear reactor represent commendable progress toward North Korean denuclearization. Similarly, North Korea's earlier delivery of approximately 19,000 pages of Yongbyon's operating records provided a trove of information for the U.S. Intelligence Community to refine its assessments of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons inventory. The destruction of the cooling tower marks a notable step in the disablement of North Korea's plutonium production capability. All of these steps represent greater progress than was ever achieved under the 1994 Agreed Framework.

These steps do not, however, constitute complete compliance by North Korea of its data declaration commitments. North Korea's refusal to provide full transparency on its nuclear programs raises serious questions over its commitment to fulfill even more difficult future requirements. These questions are made all the more worrisome by the demonstrated willingness of the U.S. to lower the bar for North Korean compliance and walk away from its strongest pledges.

On June 26, the Bush Administration vowed to secure a rigorous verification regime capable of preventing North Korea from violating yet another international agreement on denuclearization. The Administration should carefully abide by this pledge and follow up on progress in the six-party talks with a demand for full North Korean compliance with all existing commit-

ments. It should also insist that subsequent joint statements more clearly delineate North Korean requirements in order to prevent noncompliance through creative interpretation.

Data Declaration Shortcomings. Though full details of the data declaration are not public, indications are that North Korea refused to divulge information on its covert efforts to develop a uranium-based nuclear weapons program and its nuclear proliferation activities with other nations. The February 2007 Joint Statement requires Pyongyang to provide "a complete declaration of *all* nuclear programs." At the time, U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill deflected criticism that the joint statement did not include a specific reference to the uranium program by asserting that the plural form of "programs" clearly included both plutonium and uranium programs.

During April 2008 bilateral meetings with North Korea in Singapore, the Bush Administration tentatively agreed to an unusual strategy in which the United States rather than Pyongyang would provide requisite data on North Korea's uranium program and proliferation activities. Rather than admitting to having violated previous international agreements, Pyongyang would then merely "acknowledge"

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Washington's concerns by not challenging the U.S. information. Such a strategy is inconsistent with the approach to other arms control treaties signed by the U.S. Washington also acquiesced to North Korean demands to postpone disclosing the number of its nuclear weapons until a later phase of negotiations.

In October 2007, President Bush stated that North Korea was required to provide "a full declaration of any proliferation activities."¹ Secretary of State Rice stated during a June 18 speech at The Heritage Foundation that "North Korea has proliferated nuclear technology to Syria."² In November 2006, President Bush vowed that "the transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for the consequences of such action."³

Removal from Terrorist List Risks Alienating Japan. Premature removal of North Korea from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism risks alienating key ally Japan. The Bush Administration has justified such a removal by citing Pyongyang's having fulfilled the narrow statutory requirements of not committing a terrorist act for six months. Previously, the U.S. had conditioned the removal on Pyongyang returning to Japan the remaining members of the Red Army Faction terrorist group who continue to reside in North Korea.

President Bush had also provided a political commitment to then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that the U.S. would also require progress on resolving North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens. Dennis Wilder, senior director for

Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, told reporters in April 2007 that "we aren't going to delink the abductee issue from the state sponsor of terrorism issue."⁴ It is noteworthy that Libya was required to acknowledge and make restitution for its involvement in the Lockerbie terrorist act.

Tokyo has long been concerned that the U.S. would forego demanding progress on the abductee issue in return for progress in the six-party talks. Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura conveyed Tokyo's concern that prematurely removing North Korea from the terrorism list would reduce allied negotiating leverage. North Korea recently stated that it would reopen the investigations into the abductions. But Komura stated on June 22 that "we haven't seen enough progress on the abduction issue."⁵

The Administration must maintain the integrity of the criteria for determining state sponsors of terrorism. Failure to do so would undermine the credibility of the process in the eyes of would-be terrorists worldwide. As Secretary Rice herself has said, "The non-negotiable demands of human dignity are not bargaining chips."

Verification Remains Critical. Secretary Rice declared on June 18 that the U.S. would demand extensive verification of the data declaration, including access to nuclear facilities and documents. The State Department's June 26 fact sheet proposes a comprehensive verification regime that would include short-notice access to declared and suspected sites, sampling of materials, and interviews with North Korean personnel.

An extensive verification protocol is necessary to ensure that North Korea fulfills its denuclearization

1. The White House, "Press Conference by the President," October 17, 2007, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071017.html> (June 26, 2008).
2. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Policy Toward Asia," June 18, 2008, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/06/106034.htm> (June 26, 2008).
3. David E. Sanger and Helene Cooper, "Bush, in Asia, Makes Appeal on North Korea," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2006, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/world/asia/16cnd-prexy.html?hp&ex=1163739600&en=5f7eda6a9e220b4e&ei=5094&partner=homepage> (June 26, 2008).
4. Yonhap News Agency, "U.S. will not remove N. Korea from list of terror-sponsoring states: official," April 27, 2007, at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1824427/posts> (June 26, 2008).
5. Daily Yomiuri, "No lifting of sanctions without probe check," June 23, 2008, at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/world/20080623TDY01305.htm> (June 26, 2008).

pledge. Pyongyang will resist intrusive inspections throughout North Korea but the Bush Administration must insist on nothing less than verification requirements consistent with previous U.S. arms control treaties. Though the Administration's pledge for strong verification is encouraging, past behavior indicates it will be difficult to maintain U.S. resolve and gain North Korean acceptance on the issue.

Prospects for Future Progress. North Korean officials have repeatedly indicated their intention to achieve international recognition of North Korea as a nuclear state. Such statements are at odds with U.S. public reassurances of Pyongyang's willingness to fully abide by its denuclearization pledge. Washington should test Pyongyang's veracity by insisting on a joint statement that clearly defines North

Korean requirements for complete transparency, including full disclosure of its uranium weapons program and proliferation activities, a vigorous verification system, and a timeline for destruction of its nuclear weapons.

All indications are that the Bush Administration will, at most, achieve completion of phase two of the six-party talks—disablement rather than dismantlement of North Korean nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. However, serious questions remain as to whether North Korea will fully dismantle its nuclear weapons and programs.

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