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North Korean Nuclear Freeze: A Positive but Limited Development

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Washington has announced that North Korea has acquiesced to several longstanding U.S. and South Korean demands related to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programs. North Korea's agreement to freeze its nuclear activities under international observation marks a major reversal after nearly four years of refusal. The development is particularly surprising since it occurs only two months after the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

However, the development, though positive, represents a tactical rather than strategic breakthrough. The agreement is extremely limited in scope, and when negotiating with North Korea, the devil is always in the details. Previous U.S. Administrations have frequently accepted vaguely worded text in order to maintain an illusion of progress only to later find Pyongyang

exploiting loopholes or covertly cheating on the agreement. It is critical that Washington insist on detailed text in this and any subsequent agreements, as well as extensive verification measures.

Return to the Bargaining Table. U.S. officials indicated that the agreement would simply enable additional bilateral meetings to struggle over framing the agenda for a possible eventual return to multilateral nuclear negotiations. The six-party talks, which began in 2003, collapsed in 2008 when Pyongyang refused to abide by a verification accord that U.S. diplomats claimed had been agreed upon. It is worrisome that, since then, North Korea has repeatedly asserted that it has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons—which is counter to the declared goal of the talks.

Even a resumption of the six-party talks would not be a victory in itself but instead simply the beginning of long, arduous negotiations—the diplomatic equivalent of putting weary boxers back in the ring for round two of a 15-round bout. There is little optimism that Pyongyang will fully abandon its nuclear arsenal, making it critical that the U.S. and its allies maintain sanctions and

sufficient defenses against North Korean provocations even during a return to negotiations.

The Bumpy Road Back to Engagement. Washington and Pyongyang simultaneously announced an agreement on North Korean nuclear activities in return for U.S. affirmations on non-hostile intent and 240,000 tons of nutritional assistance. Pyongyang declared that it had “agreed to a moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment activity at Yongbyon and [will] allow the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] to monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment while productive dialogues continue.”

Although some will interpret the agreement as reflecting a major shift by North Korea's new leader, Kim Jong-un, the details are consistent with those that U.S. officials indicated would have been reached during a December bilateral meeting that was cancelled due to Kim Jong-il's death. North Korean statements since Kim Jong-il's death indicate far greater policy continuity than change. North Korea's authoritative National Defense Commission declared in December, “We solemnly declare to the world's foolish politicians,

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including the puppets in South Korea, that they should not expect any changes from us.”

There is no evidence that Kim Jong-un will be any more likely than his predecessors to implement political or economic reform. Nor will Jong-un pursue a foreign policy that veers from North Korea’s reliance on provocations, threats, and an occasional charm offensive to attain its goals.

What Did the U.S. Pay For?

The announced agreement is typically vague and leaves many questions unanswered. The most glaring omission is any North Korean commitment to improve relations with South Korea, which was another of Washington’s and Seoul’s long-standing requirements. Seoul may decide that it no longer requires a formal apology for North Korea’s two attacks on South Korea in 2010, but the Obama Administration should ensure that Seoul is not left on the sidelines. It should condition any additional U.S. bilateral meetings on Pyongyang resuming inter-Korean talks.

The agreement requires North Korea only to accept IAEA inspectors at the Yongbyon nuclear facility. Pyongyang’s November 2010 disclosure of an extensive uranium enrichment program at Yongbyon, which was relocated from another location, shows that there are additional covert nuclear sites that should be subject to verification in any subsequent agreements.

The agreement also contains several vague but potentially troublesome U.S. commitments. Although seemingly benign, references to U.S. pledges to non-hostile intent and the 1953 armistice could give Pyongyang leverage for additional conditions for its previous denuclearization

commitments. These demands could include removal of U.S. troops from South Korea, abrogation of the bilateral U.S.–South Korea defense alliance, and a peace treaty prior to North Korea reducing its conventional forces threat to Seoul.

Washington’s acceptance that “U.S. sanctions against [North Korea] are not targeted against the livelihood of the [North Korean] people” may evolve into Pyongyang demanding a removal of U.S. and international sanctions simply for returning to negotiations. North Korea declared in January that the Obama Administration had agreed to suspend international sanctions against North Korea in return for Pyongyang temporarily suspending uranium enrichment. U.S. officials denied Pyongyang’s claim.

What the U.S. Should Do

- **Insist that North Korea commit to complete and verifiable denuclearization.** Nor should Washington allow Pyongyang to use brinksmanship and threats to redefine the parameters of the negotiations.
- **Require that future six-party-talks agreements be sufficiently detailed** to explicitly delineate linkage between North Korean steps toward denuclearization and the economic and diplomatic benefits to be provided.
- **Maintain sanctions** until the behavior that triggered them has ceased, rebuffing Pyongyang’s entreaties to abandon punitive measures to “improve the negotiating atmosphere.” Both diplomacy and pressure tactics should be part of a comprehensive strategy.

- **Affirm unequivocal commitment to defending South Korea and Japan** through the promise of extended deterrence comprised of conventional forces, missile defense, and the nuclear umbrella.

- **Maintain a robust forward-deployed military presence in South Korea and Japan.** Such a presence is necessary to defend critical allies and maintain peace in northeast Asia. The U.S. should augment training exercises in South Korea, including U.S. combat units deployed from the United States and U.S. forward bases in Asia in future training exercises on the Korean Peninsula.

- **Fully fund U.S. defense requirements.** Reducing U.S. military capabilities undercuts America’s ability to defend its allies, deter security threats, and respond quickly to aggressive actions or natural disasters in Asia. Defense cuts of \$486 billion will already negatively impact U.S. deterrence and defense capabilities. An additional \$500 billion in cuts required under budget sequestration would have a devastating effect on U.S. national interests.

Learn from Past Mistakes

The U.S. need not refrain from discussions with North Korea to probe whether Pyongyang is willing to denuclearize in return for economic and diplomatic benefits. But Washington should learn from the mistakes of the past and insist that any subsequent agreements clearly delineate objectives, responsibilities, metrics, and timelines to avoid once again being duped.

Engagement should also not be perceived either as a means to empower nonexistent reformist elements in Pyongyang or as a panacea for preventing North Korean provocations. The regime chooses to ramp up tension, which it sees as increasing its leverage, when it perceives that it is being ignored or to increase its leverage for attaining its objectives, regardless of whether it is sitting at a negotiation table.

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