Uses of Ambiguity in North Korea Agreement

On September 19, North Korea agreed to give up its nuclear program. As part of the same agreement, which followed the latest round of the Six Party Talks, the United States pledged not to attack or invade North Korea, to coexist peacefully with the country, and to work toward normalized relations. The United States and other parties to the agreement—China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea—offered to put together an energy package for North Korea.

1. Shift Toward Diplomacy

While this agreement represents the triumph of diplomacy over military confrontation—and an important U.S. shift toward negotiating with a country previously declared beyond negotiations—it doesn't represent a victory of clarity over ambiguity. In fact, the differences of opinion that marked the confrontation prior to the agreement remain largely untouched. No specific commitments have been nailed down; no deadlines have been identified. Both the United States and North Korea have issued their own independent interpretations of the agreement and, not surprisingly, they do not see eye to eye.

2. Ambiguities Will Bedevil Negotiations

The agreement's ambiguities will bedevil negotiators when talks resume in November. The ambiguities revolve around the following issues:

Civilian nuclear power: North Korea wants a light-water nuclear reactor from the United States to substitute for its dismantled nuclear complex. The Bush administration has repeatedly declared that such a nuclear reactor is not part of the deal. The agreement merely states that the countries involved will address the issue of a civilian nuclear program "at an appropriate time."

Sequence: North Korea wants incentives step-by-step through the process while the United States has maintained that any energy supplies will come only after dismantlement. Since the agreement lacks any specific deadlines, the disagreement over sequence has merely been kicked down the road.

Normalization: The agreement does not spell out the steps North Korea needs to take to normalize relations with the United States and Japan. Japan has demanded more information about its citizens that North Korea abducted in the 1970s and 1980s and who remain unaccounted for. Unmentioned in the agreement is North Korea's human rights record, which the Bush administration has previously implied is linked to diplomatic recognition. North Korea considers explicit linkage of human rights to normalization to be interference in its sovereignty and has argued that it provided Japan all available information on the missing abductees.

3. Background Agendas

The ambiguity of the agreement speaks not to any lack of diplomatic skill but rather to the eagerness of the key players to achieve some measure of progress in the negotiations. The United States needs a foreign policy victory to balance the twin quagmires of Iraq and New Orleans. North Korea desperately needs a transfusion of energy to revive its industry and agriculture. In addition to the heightened stature of brokering a compromise, China wants to avoid any military confrontation between the United States and North Korea that might jeopardize its own economic growth. South Korea wants to keep its own engagement policy with the North on track.

4. Steps Necessary for Genuine Agreement

As negotiators prepare for the next round of talks, much can be done to inch away from ambiguity and toward genuine compromise, including the following steps:

Face to Face Meeting: Chief U.S. negotiator Chris Hill has expressed interest in visiting Pyongyang between now and the start of the next round of talks. Such a face-to-face meeting by a high-level envoy would go a long way toward satisfying North Korea's desire for bilateral negotiations and could therefore help nudge Pyongyang toward greater reciprocal flexibility.

Energy Dependency: North Korea's desire for a civilian nuclear program is in part a fear of being dependent on outside sources of energy. While South Korea has been remarkably generous in its energy promises—offering as much as $10 billion of electricity over the next decade—Pyongyang doesn't want its entire infrastructure subject to the whims of Seoul. Negotiators recognized North Korea's sovereign right to a civilian nuclear program but not its underlying concerns about energy dependency.

Realistic Give-and-Take: No country is likely to give up its only bargaining chip in exchange for a promise of recompense in the final stage. But neither is North Korea likely to receive any truly significant concession at the very outset. Both the United States and North Korea must step away from these maximalist positions and hammer out a realistic sequence of give-and-take.

Building a New Framework: North Korea must stop viewing normalization of relations with the United States as a solution to its international isolation and economic predicament. And the United States should stop viewing normalization as a reward for North Korea's good behavior. Normalized relations between the two countries should instead be understood as a framework for discussing bilateral issues of concern. The sooner both countries establish such a framework the better.

5. Clarity Next Time

Both the United States and North Korea may well be using the September agreement as a stalling tactic. The Bush administration is divided on the issue of North Korea, and several key administration figures such as Vice President Cheney prefer regime collapse to substantive negotiations. In North Korea, meanwhile, a hard-line faction likely favors waiting for a better deal or a more robust nuclear deterrent. With the September 19 agreement, the negotiators at least temporarily trumped the hardliners by using ambiguity as a method of achieving common ground. In November, they'll have to risk both clarity and confrontation in order to get a real deal.

(John Feffer wrote these Talking Points for FPIF, online at www.fpif.org. Feffer is the author of *North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis* and a member of FPIF's Advisory Committee.)

These Talking Points on North Korea reflect the principles of the Global Good Neighbor Ethic for International Relations, especially Principle Three:

"Given that our national interests, security, and social well-being are interconnected to other peoples, U.S. foreign policy must be based on reciprocity rather than domination, mutual well-being rather than cutthroat competition, and cooperation rather than confrontation."

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