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North Korea Triumphs Again in Diplomacy

By Nicholas Eberstadt

North Korea's latest agreement on denuclearization will allow its government to continue working on nuclear weapons under the guise of "peaceful energy" and to isolate South Korea through false promises of a denuclearized peninsula. This "breakthrough" was achieved almost entirely at the expense of U.S. and allied interests.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, which holds the North Korean state to be an unremittingly hostile "negotiating partner," history actually demonstrates that Pyongyang can be a highly obliging interlocutor under certain very specific conditions. All that is necessary to "get to yes" with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is to concede every important point demanded by the North Korean side while sacrificing vital interests of one's own.

The mid-September "breakthrough" at the six-party talks in Beijing would appear to conform precisely to this long-established pattern. The vaunted outcome—a long-desired "consensus statement" inked by North Korea and the other five governments engaged in protracted discussions over North Korean denuclearization—is being celebrated by diplomatic sophisticates in Seoul, Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo, and Washington.

Peaceful Nuclear Energy?

Enthusiasts contend that the North Korean regime, after two years of tough talks with five other countries united in the desire to force it to dismantle its nuclear weapons program, has at last agreed to a step-by-step process that will eventually resolve the crisis. In reality, nothing of the sort has taken place. A careful reading of the September 19 joint statement suggests instead that North Korean negotiators have just achieved a stunning advance in their government's quest to "normalize" its nuclear weapons program. There has also been equally momentous progress in Pyongyang's longstanding campaign to sunder the U.S.-South Korean military alliance. Wittingly or otherwise, the U.S. negotiating team has executed an apparent cave-in—embracing precepts crucial to North Korean objectives but inimical to Washington's own.

To appreciate the full significance of this joint statement, one need only dwell on two of its precepts: the first is North Korea's now internationally ratified "peaceful right to the uses of nuclear energy," and the second is the purportedly common "goal of . . . verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." According to the joint statement, North Korea "stated that it has the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The other parties expressed their respect and agreed to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of [a] light-water reactor to the DPRK." There is a problem with this declaration, though. Pyongyang's "peaceful nuclear energy program" is, as almost everyone knows, an entirely imaginary animal—akin to the unicorn.

Although North Korea's nuclear program extends back decades and has entailed terrible expense for its people (it continued through the

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great famine of the 1990s, despite international agreements to "freeze" it), there is no evidence whatever to suggest that North Korea attempted to harness the atom for civilian purposes. The reactors at Yongbyon—the site that initially attracted world concern about Pyongyang's nuclear intentions—were never hooked up to the country's electrical energy grid, nor are they today. They have been exclusively used for harvesting weapons-grade plutonium.

Moreover, North Korea has been caught out (through classified intelligence reports, but also via acknowledgments from Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf, whose country's scientists collaborated with Pyongyang) in an illicit program to manufacture highly enriched uranium. This was the trigger for the latest round of the DPRK nuclear crisis, commencing in October 2002.

North Korea's nuclear record is unique. Not only is it the only state ever to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, but North Korea is also without a doubt the contemporary government that has striven hardest and most consistently to mislead the international community about its nuclear capabilities. Under such circumstances, "respecting" its right to pursue a "peaceful" nuclear program in effect offers Pyongyang carte blanche to continue stockpiling an atomic arsenal.

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Isolating South Korea

Washington initially resisted the DPRK's surreal proposal for an international acceptance of "peaceful North Korean nuclear power." Once the Chinese and South Korean governments indicated that they were prepared to endorse this fiction, however, the U.S. government signed on, too. As to the endorsed "goal of . . . verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," this formula conjoins the objective of dismantling the North's nukes with the notion of making South Korea nuke-free. But since the latter has never made nuclear weapons—and since all U.S. nuclear weapons were removed from there fifteen years ago—how is the corollary to work?

Pyongyang's rhetorical syllogism depends entirely upon the existence of the U.S.-Seoul military alliance. So long as the United States is treaty-bound to South Korea's defense, Pyongyang maintains that any and all means of American security protections—including nuclear guarantees—naturally cover the South. In this logic, the only way by which the southern portion of the Korean peninsula can be "denuclearized" is by severing the U.S.-South Korean military alliance, by withdrawing all U.S. forces from South Korea, and by leaving South Korea outside the U.S. security perimeter (as it seemed to be in early 1950).

The Beijing joint statement of "common understanding" is being described as a defeat for Bush administration hardliners (who favor regime-change in North Korea) and a victory for administration moderates (who prefer diplomatic engagement). In fact, it is a loss for both camps. After all, the cause of engagement with North Korea is undermined—not promoted—by uncritically embracing a flawed schema for a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear crisis.

The future of the six-party talks, as always, remains uncertain. But negotiations between the United States and North Korea—whether in bilateral or multilateral forums—have always been zero-sum deals. At present Pyongyang seems to be reaping tremendous gains. North Korea can therefore rightly view the recent joint statement as a diplomatic triumph—a multilateral broadening, and political deepening, of the gains from the Clinton-era "Agreed Framework." This joint statement affirms all of the "rewards-for-freeze" precepts that helped to finance the survival of the state—and the development of nuclear weaponry—in the earlier 1994 accord. But not only has the world now seen the failure of the earlier North Korean nonproliferation accords, it has also witnessed a new administration in Washington—purportedly cognizant of all the earlier U.S. mistakes—make those mistakes all over again.