

## The Agreement from the 3rd Round of US–DPRK Denuclearization Talks and the Outlook for the North Korean Nuclear Issue

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Online Series CO 12-11

Naturally we should be pleased that North Korea is showing a more conciliatory stance after a long period of stagnation, but perhaps because of past experience it leaves a slightly bitter taste. This is the thought that occurs to me after looking at the agreement that was reached at the third round of high-level talks between the US and North Korea held in Beijing last February 23~24, whose contents were released on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The subtle differences in the contents of the agreement announced by each side hint at points of contention that both sides sought to play down. It is discouraging to imagine how far the two sides will be able to carry an agreement that they had to conceal their true intentions to make. It appears that North Korea has returned to its past practice of making deliberately vague agreements so it will be easy to find some pretext to abandon them later on.

According to the US side's announcement, North Korea agreed not only to suspend operations at its uranium enrichment program (UEP) at Yongbyon but also to allow IAEA inspectors to return and to institute a moratorium on long-range missile launches. In return the North will receive 240,000 tons of food assistance, although the US emphasizes that this is a separate matter. Since some

portion of this will be used to supplement the food supplies needed for the Kim Il Sung centenary celebration in April, this deal has been evaluated by some as a major decision. At a glance it may also appear that North Korea has made considerable concessions.

However, comparing the US announcement with that of the North Korean side, it is clear to see that it would be an exaggeration to say that this represented either a concession or a major decision by the North. The US side's announcement says that the North agreed to a moratorium on missile launches, nuclear tests, and uranium enrichment activities and agreed to allow an IAEA inspection team in to verify that this moratorium is being maintained. The North Korean announcement, on the other hand, says that it agreed to temporarily halt nuclear tests, missile launches and uranium enrichment and to allow IAEA inspections for as long as productive talks continue. It is worth noting that the US refers to the activities to be done by the IAEA at Yongbyon as "inspection and verification" (*keomjeungmithwakin*) while the North Korean side says that it agreed "to allow monitoring" (*kamshireulheoyonghanda*). Furthermore North Korea's condition that the moratorium will last only "while productive talks continue" suggests that it intends to restart uranium enrichment whenever it judges the talks to be stalled.

What makes observers suspicious is that each country announced its own separate version of the agreement, despite the risk of exposing this disparity in positions. Of course this may have been done through mutual agreement, but some people wonder if perhaps the two sides chose to make separate announcements due to apparent differences between the two sides that foreshadowed difficulties in subsequent negotiations. Surely the US has not forgotten about the many previous instances in which North Korea has used some excuse to break vague agreements it made in the past. North Korea's reason for making this agreement is also dubious. Since it would have been easier to not make any agreement at all, there is ample cause to wonder why they would choose to make an agreement that so blatantly exposes points of contention.

What could have prompted the US to push through this agreement so hurriedly? It may be that they were eager to show some progress in advance of Obama's reelection campaign. However an agreement that exposes such obvious contention and has no clear prospect of success is hardly likely to help in a re-election campaign. Even if the Six Party Talks were to be resumed, unless major progress is made toward North Korean denuclearization they are unlikely to be a positive

factor in the election. Though a disheartening thought, it is possible that the US hurried through this agreement to send a message to Israel. As Israel weighs the possibility of bombing Iran's nuclear facilities, the US may have wanted to show Israel that a peaceful solution is possible. This thought arises in light of Israel's non sequitur remark that "This recent US-DPRK agreement is not sufficient proof that Iran's nuclear program can be resolved through diplomacy."

This is not just a ploy to rein in Israel's hardliners. Actually the US also needed a chance to study the new Kim Jong Eun regime's approach to foreign relations. They may have assessed that even if this is just a preliminary agreement to reconfirm the differences in positions, the subsequent negotiations will provide useful opportunities to observe North Korea's behavior. At any rate they probably wanted to confirm North Korea's uranium enrichment capabilities. Although the program's existence was confirmed by Dr. Siegfried Hecker in 2010, at present we can only speculate as to how far it has progressed, so the US probably wanted to get confirmation by sending in an IAEA inspection team. Regardless of how far subsequent inspections can proceed, the US is probably eager simply to get close enough to make a visual inspection.

North Korea's true intentions are not much different. This agreement is the first major move Kim Jong Eun has made toward the US. They may have wanted to demonstrate that the Kim Jong Eun regime is internally secure enough to reach an agreement on equal footing with the US. They were also probably curious about how the US would deal with the successor regime. In this context they could use the food aid deal to test the US' approach to the Kim Jong Eun regime. It would be a mistake to assume that North Korea rushed through this agreement in order to solve its food shortage problem. Whether the US provides 240,000 tons of food aid or not will not make much difference in North Korea's ability to hold a celebration for Kim Il Sung's centenary. Even though this is a bigger deal than other national holidays, North Korea has no intention of distributing food to every part of the country. It would be enough to make a display of largesse to certain classes and people in Pyongyang, and they are capable of doing that much on their own.

North Korea's real motive behind this agreement can be interpreted in the following way. They may have watered down the agreement on inspections with the term "monitoring" and the precondition that they would continue only as long as the talks are fruitful, but opening the Yongbyon facility also gives them the chance to show off their nuclear capabilities. Once the US is convinced of their nuclear capabilities then the North can proceed to use hard-line tactics. If, without

giving away their secrets entirely, they can prove that their nuclear program is no hollow rice cracker, they will then be able to wield the threat more effectively. Thus they will try to show just enough of the Yongbyon facility to suit their purposes without exposing its full capabilities. Since the uranium enrichment facility, unlike the plutonium reprocessing facility, can be operated on a small scale, it can be easily moved and thus the North can show only as much they want to. Since the world already knows of the facility from Dr. Hecker's report, it was reasonable for the North to agree to these terms.

Thus, although their motivations were different, the two sides shared a common need to reach this agreement quickly. But it is hard to feel optimistic about the chances of this leading to a resumption of the Six Party Talks, which have been suspended since 2008. If North Korea indeed suspends its UEP and allows IAEA inspections, a resumption of the Six Party Talks would certainly seem likely to follow, but North Korea is unlikely to expose its own nuclear abilities completely. It has allowed inspection teams into the country in the past but prevented them from getting too close to the nuclear facilities. It seems probable that this time as well they will try to keep things as vague as possible while giving the impression of some sort of meaningful progress.

The question of whether the US will be willing to move past some of the preliminary measures for denuclearization will also largely determine whether or not this agreement will lead to a resumption of the Six Party Talks. The US will have some difficulty putting to rest domestic and international opposition if they attempt to pass the baton on to the Six Party Talks without first making a precise inspection of the Yongbyon UEP facility, but they must have a sufficient reason for handling things via the Six Party Talks. However the North Korean side, which has refused inspections in the past, will probably not allow inspections just for the sake of resuming the Six Party Talks. The US probably shares this assessment. There is another problem lurking: that of the other uranium enrichment facilities besides Yongbyon that are scattered throughout North Korea. If the Six Party Talks resume this issue will naturally come up, and it may become an obstacle to further progress at the talks. We will have to closely watch the progress of the future negotiations in New York for more insight into these suspicions and the US' thoughts about them.

There is one concern that comes up in our society every time US–North Korea contacts occur, and that is the North Korean strategy of approaching the US while excluding South Korea. The memory of the Geneva Agreement, in which North

Korea and the US negotiated together and South Korea was left to foot much of the bill, has created a victim consciousness. In fact, North Korea has stubbornly insisted on dealing with the US alone as its negotiating partner on the nuclear issue. This stubbornness on the part of the North has weakened South Korea's negotiating power. Because the North refuses to deal with us, it is difficult to draw their attention to ordinary matters. In this sense at least the North's "approach the US, exclude South Korea" strategy can be judged a success. To succeed at the "approach the US" part they must eliminate the US' concerns, but the North's continued commitment to nuclear development makes "approaching the US" impossible. Also, "approaching the US" inevitably must lead to "approaching South Korea." This is because the former is made possible by the heightened prospect of denuclearization, which is naturally connected to the latter.

Since Kim Jong Il's death North Korea has extolled its nuclear weapons as the late leader's greatest achievement and declared that they will continue to be maintained. North Korea considers negotiations another form of warfare. This much is clear from the message the North has promoted via various commentaries, in reference to the US side's announcement of the agreement, promoting this as a victory for their side and a defeat for the US. North Korea enters negotiations with the intention to achieve victory, and it will be interesting to see what sort of stance they deploy in the subsequent detailed negotiations with the US. This recent agreement is nothing more than a single point on a line. Whether this line leads to denuclearization of the peninsula or not remains to be seen. We should avoid being bewildered by catch phrases like "approaching the US, excluding South Korea," and observe the proceedings with a relaxed but watchful attitude.