

North Korea Deal Is Tentative Step Ahead

by William Jones

The implementation agreement reached at the conclusion of the fifth session of the six-party talks on North Korea Feb. 13 has helped to significantly reduce the danger of a confrontation on the Korean Peninsula and indicated, in a rather dramatic manner, how the influence of Vice President Dick Cheney has been seriously curtailed. A general revolt against the Cheney policy by former U.S. diplomats with a long association with Asia, as well as a growing revolt in the U.S. military against the “utopian” policy of the Cheneyacs, has helped whittle away the power of this most imperial Vice President. The demonstrations Cheney met with on his most recent trip to Japan, where he was welcomed in Tokyo with shouts from protestors of “Yankee, Go Home!” shows just how far the Cheney policy has gone in diminishing respect for the United States, even in a country like Japan, long deemed a close ally.

The dogged efforts of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Ambassador Christopher Hill, who was finally permitted to offer the kinds of concessions to the North Koreans which would provide a real reason for them to dismantle their nuclear program, also contributed to the successful outcome of these preliminary talks. And, as all the parties readily admit, without the forceful effort of the Chinese diplomatic team, the North Koreans would have never come back to the negotiating table.

As Hill is quick to emphasize, this is only an initial agreement on the path to what the Bush Administration hopes will be a complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The Administration is not alone in that desire. China also would be unhappy with a nuclear-armed North Korea, fearing that Japan would then also move to acquire a nuclear capability.

In spite of the difficulties always associated with any dealings with the ever-so-opaque “hermit kingdom,” a deal probably could have been reached much earlier, had Cheney not been allowed to sabotage negotiations. Ever since the Vice President forced then-Secretary of State Colin Powell to “eat his words,” that the new Administration would be following up the efforts made by Clinton in the 1994 Agreed Framework agreement with the D.P.R.K., Cheney has put up roadblocks to diplomacy.

Hysteria Among the Neo-Cons

A change in mood with regard to North Korea was clearly evident in Hill’s visit to Berlin in January, where he engaged

in extensive hours-long discussions with North Korean representatives, and where presumably the details of the implementation agreement were preliminarily worked out. While the official position of the Bush Administration is still that of not engaging in bilateral talks with the North Koreans, except in the context of the multilateral six-party talks (China, South Korea, North Korea, the United States, Russia, and Japan) it is in fact what Hill did in Berlin—and without receiving a reprimand—that moved the situation forward. That former UN Ambassador John Bolton has been so vociferous in his criticism of the agreement negotiated by Hill, indicates the level of hysteria within the neo-con clique over the way they have been sidelined in this latest endeavor.

Elliott Abrams, National Security Council director for the Middle East, also voiced his protest in an e-mail questioning the provision of the agreement that states that the United States would take North Korea off the list of terrorist sponsors. White House Press spokesman Tony Snow later said that Abrams’ concerns had been satisfied after discussions with the “Asia hands” on the NSC. More likely, Abrams had been read the riot act, telling him to concentrate on his own area of responsibility, and let others handle the North Korea issue. In the Berlin talks, Hill also made clear what the United States was prepared to do if the denuclearization was accomplished, including completely normalizing its relations with the D.P.R.K.

The agreement essentially outlined a series of steps to be implemented by the parties within the next 60 days, that would move them in the direction of the commitments they made in the Joint Statement agreed to by all parties in September 2005. North Korea had backed out of that agreement after the U.S. Treasury moved to place sanctions on the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA), on the pretext that Banco money had been used to finance the North’s nuclear program. Freezing the accounts essentially hamstrung North Korea’s economic reform program, and was a major blow to its economic jugular. The D.P.R.K. insisted that they would not adhere to the September 2005 agreement until the accounts were unfrozen. Hill indicated in a speech to the Brookings Institution on Feb. 22 that the issue with the BDA account would be resolved within 30 days of the agreement. The measures that must be taken by North Korea include:

- Shutting down and sealing the Yongbyon nuclear facility for the purpose of abandoning that plutonium production program;
- Inviting the IAEA to return to the country to conduct all necessary monitoring and verification as agreed between the IAEA and the D.P.R.K.;
- Discussing a list of all the D.P.R.K.’s nuclear programs and materials, including the plutonium extracted from fuel rods that will be abandoned pursuant to the Joint Statement.

The last issue could provide a stumbling block, Hill indicated. While the Bush Administration says it is in possession of information indicating that the D.P.R.K. has made pur-

chases that could be used to build a nuclear facility that utilized highly enriched uranium rather than plutonium, the North Koreans deny that they have built, or are in the processing of building, such a facility. The D.P.R.K. has, however, agreed to discuss whatever information Washington may have on such a program.

The negotiations ran into a roadblock toward the end of the final negotiating session when the North Koreans increased their demand for fuel oil over and above the 50,000 tons per year that the United States (together with its partners) was prepared to provide. This was the amount that had been decided upon in the original 1994 Agreed Framework worked out with the Clinton Administration, and was also the figure used in the September 2005 Joint Statement. But Bush was not prepared to contribute more than the previous Clinton agreement, which has been lambasted by the Bush Administration as a “sell-out” to the North Koreans. For a short time, it seemed that these talks too would end in a stalemate, but a compromise was reached: The agreement now includes a provision that the partners will provide up to 1 million tons of heavy fuel oil when the North Koreans begin to meet some of their own commitments in the agreement.

The Bush Administration has also committed itself to normalizing relations with North Korea and eventually brokering a peace treaty with the country, officially putting an end to the state of siege stemming from the Korean War. The Bush Administration is also prepared to begin the process of removing the designation of the D.P.R.K. as a state-sponsor of terrorism, and advance the process of terminating the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act with respect to North Korea.

Overcoming the Japan-Korea Hurdle

Another complicating factor in reaching a final agreement involves the conflict between Japan and North Korea over Japanese citizens who have been abducted by the North to be trained as spies. Hill indicated that he had more bilateral meetings with the Japanese than with any other delegation, coaxing them forward on the road that they were probably not so eager to travel. One of the working groups which was created, will deal with the normalization of the D.P.R.K.-Japan relations.

Five working groups were set up to deal with various aspects of the agreement: 1) denuclearization of the Korean peninsula; 2) normalization of U.S.-D.P.R.K. relations; 3) normalization of Japan-D.P.R.K. relations; 4) economy and energy cooperation; and 5) the creation of a Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism. In connection with the last working group, it is hoped that the six-party format can be transformed into a more permanent framework for regional



State Department

Ambassador Christopher Hill, shown here at a State Department briefing last July, overcame outright sabotage from the Vice President's office, to reach an initial agreement on North Korea at Six-Party talks on Feb. 13.

cooperation, similar to what ASEAN has been for the countries of Southeast Asia. This has been a prime goal for China, as well as for the United States; both would see such an organization as a major factor of stability in the Northeast Asia region.

For South Korea, a successful agreement would mean that it could continue on a path toward eventual reunification with the North. Already, one day after the Feb. 13 agreement was announced, South Korea announced that the ministerial level talks with the D.P.R.K., which had broken down in the middle of North Korea's July 2006 missile launches, would resume shortly.

The parties are scheduled to meet again on March 19 to review the progress after the first 30 days, and to lay out the path for the second stage, which will begin when all the requirements of the first 60 days have been met. The 50,000 tons of fuel oil will be delivered to the D.P.R.K. during the first phase, and the 950,000 additional tons will be sequenced for delivery during the second phase of the process.

While the outlook for a resolution of the North Korean crisis seems particularly bright at the present moment, there is still a way to go, and obstacles remain on the path to a final resolution. As Hill said at Brookings, “There are no victory laps yet.” The step-by-step procedure leaves a lot of room for problems to arise at every step of the process. The whims of the mercurial North Korean leader may also prevent the process from proceeding smoothly. And until Cheney is removed from office, he will continue to attempt to kick over the card table, even after all the hands have been dealt.