

North Korea Strikes a Deal on Nukes

Contributed by Shim Jae Hoon
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Six-party talks yield important movement toward easing tension and ending nuclear weapons development in return for aid, energy and normalization.

Five months after it conducted an underground nuclear test that sent shockwaves around the world, North Korea has agreed to a landmark deal with the United States and other powers, including China and Russia, to halt the operation of the main nuclear reactor at the heart of its atomic weapons program.

The agreement, if followed through by all parties, clears the way for North Korea to receive aid, diplomatic recognition and an end to its pariah status.

In short, the US is allowing North Korea to negotiate its way out of the so-called "axis of evil" through a series of concessions.

Under the deal, North Korea is set to receive 50,000 tonnes of heavy oil in return for freezing the 5-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon within 60 days. The reactor has been producing weapons grade plutonium. Pyongyang must also allow UN inspectors to visit its nuclear facilities.

The draft agreement emerged after a marathon 16-hour negotiating session during the final day of the current round of six-party talks in Beijing. The talks began over three years ago and Tuesday's agreement is seen as the best hope for the ending the stalemate over North Korea's weapons.

U.S. envoy, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, emerged early Tuesday looking weary after the marathon session to announce the tentative deal. Hill said that the pact had U.S. government support. "Yes, we've approved it. To the best of my knowledge we've approved it," he told reporters.

In October last year North Korea conducted its first test of a nuclear weapon although it was only partially successful.

The countries participating in the talks have promised to offer additional energy aid worth 950,000 tonnes of oil or electricity, in the event Pyongyang proceeds to "disable", or permanently dismantle, the main reactor, according to the agreement.

The deal represents a major bargain between the Kim Jong Il regime and the United States. It also signals Washington's willingness to negotiate on non-proliferation issues, something the Bush administration has been

unwilling to consider so far in the case of Iran's less-developed nuclear program.

In return for Pyongyang's concessions, the US has agreed to remove North Korea from the list of terrorist sponsoring nations and take actions that would lead to opening normal trade relations with North Korea.

Although it was not specifically mentioned in the agreement, South Korean diplomats in Beijing said Washington, at separate bilateral talks held in Berlin in mid-January, had also agreed to release financial sanctions on part of US\$24 million frozen by the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia after the US accused the bank of laundering money for North Korea.

The funds had been a chief stumbling block to an agreement with North Korea.

Hill, at a briefing for the media, described the deal as an "implementation agreement" directly connected to the 19 September 2005 Joint Statement in which the North promised to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for economic aid and diplomatic recognition.

In the spirit of that agreement, the six nations represented at the Beijing talks set about forming several working-level committees to discuss the process of denuclearization, economic and energy aid, and diplomatic normalization between the US and North Korea.

Significantly, Japan remained on the sidelines of this agreement saying it would not discuss any aid provision so long as the North was not forthcoming over cases of involving the repatriation of Japanese citizens abducted by the North during the Cold War.

The first shipment of oil under the pact will be provided by South Korea, according to Seoul officials at the talks. But aid and energy supplies provision will be shared fairly among the five countries — China, Japan, the US, South Korea and Russian — holding talks with North Korea.

In 2002, US President George W Bush had labeled North Korea part of his "axis of evil", which also included Iran and Iraq under Saddam Hussein. There were fears at the time that the US might even go to war with Pyongyang but with the US bogged down in a deteriorating sectarian war in Iraq, negotiation with North Korea may have seen like a better option than further conflict.

It is felt that the departure of some extreme hawks from the Bush administration helped clear the way for a negotiated settlement.

One of those hard-liners, John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the UN, told CNN that the new plan sent "exactly the wrong signal to would-be proliferators around the world".

Bolton said North Korea should not be rewarded with shipments of energy for only partially dismantling its nuclear program. "This is a very bad deal," he said.