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The Torturous Dilemma: The 2008 Six-Party Talks and U.S.-DPRK Relations



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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, President Bush started reversing his hitherto hardline stance in an attempt to see if engagement with North Korea, even after it tested a nuclear device, would possibly break the logjam. If 2006 was a year of confrontation culminating in North Korea's missile and nuclear tests and tightened multilateral and bilateral sanctions, 2007 can be characterized by a return to negotiations between North Korea and the United States. After President Bush's hardline policy produced the opposite of what the hardliners had originally hoped to accomplish, the Bush administration's North Korea policy became more pragmatic in 2007. This first year of negotiations ultimately yielded two important agreements in February and October.

The February agreement to freeze the North's nuclear facilities was implemented by October 2007 and was followed by the "October 3 Agreement" on Second-Phase Actions to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement which sought to disable the facilities at Yongbyon - a five-megawatt reactor, a reprocessing plant (radiochemical laboratory), and a nuclear fuel fabrication plant - in return for 900,000 tons of heavy fuel oil. The DPRK also reaffirmed its commitment to not engage in nuclear proliferation activities. In return, and far more vaguely, the United States agreed to "begin the process of" excluding North Korea from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and to lift sanctions imposed on it under the

Trading with the Enemy Act (TWEA) “in parallel with” the DPRK’s actions. Also, the two sides committed themselves to improving their bilateral relations and moving toward full diplomatic relations.

The year 2008 was consumed in efforts to implement the October agreement as the six countries continued to engage each other in tough negotiations over the exact meaning of the agreement and the appropriate process of its implementation. The process had a high moment when Pyongyang blew up its cooling tower and made an official declaration of its past nuclear activities and when Washington, in return, removed the North from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. But such high moments were soon followed by crises as Pyongyang reversed some of its disablement measures and Tokyo refused to provide for its share of heavy fuel oil. The progress and reversals were made all the more complicated by internal disagreements between hardliners and engagers in Washington and divisions among six-party members. This paper provides an account of the progress made and difficulties faced by the six-party members in the process of denuclearizing North Korea.

II. BACKGROUND

Although North Korea began implementing the October 3 Agreement by shutting down the five-megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and taking the first steps towards disablement, it missed the year-end deadline for both disablement and declaration. While the shutdown halted the production of additional bomb fuel (plutonium), disablement was a process designed to make the facilities inoperative for at least one year. By the end of 2007, North Korea had completed eight of the eleven disablement steps as directed in the October 3 Agreement, and U.S. administration officials were guardedly optimistic about the progress made on this front. At the end of 2007, the remaining three disablement steps included completing the discharge of the spent fuel rods remaining in the reactor; the removal and storage of the control rod drive mechanisms; and the bending of the fresh fuel rods from the fuel fabrication plant to prevent future use of these rods in the reactor.

While delays in North Korea’s disablement were, in part, of a technical nature,

political motivations were also in play. North Korea's willingness to execute disablement steps was largely based on an "action for action" principle, with expectations that actions would be reciprocated by the other six-party member states. Consequently, throughout the process, North Korea would often "adjust the tempo" of its disablement activities to coincide with the pace at which it received its energy aid commitments set forth in the October 3 Agreement. Despite missing the year-end disablement deadline, Pyongyang complained in January 2008 that it was unilaterally adhering to its commitments even with the other parties' protracted delivery of energy assistance. North Korea had reportedly received only 20 percent of the 1 million tons of heavy fuel oil (HFO): 200,000 tons of HFO from six-party members (excluding Japan) as well as 5,100 tons of steel plates from South Korea.

Beyond delays in the disablement process, the United States also expressed serious concerns about Pyongyang's missed deadline for declaration. Pyongyang's stance, which was reflected in its Foreign Ministry statement issued on January 4, 2008, was that it had already provided the United States with a declaration in November 2007. From Washington's perspective, however, North Korea's accounting of its plutonium production was not even remotely close to a "complete and correct" declaration. For example, in the November declaration, North Korea declared having some 30 kilograms of plutonium while U.S. intelligence estimates ranged from 40-50 kilograms. Furthermore, Pyongyang did not even mention such issues as its uranium enrichment program (UEP) and its proliferation activities to other nations, especially Syria; these two being the chief areas of U.S. interest in the declaration.

The North's uranium program had been a contentious issue since 2002, when disputes over an alleged highly enriched uranium program led to the collapse of the U.S.-North Korean 1994 Agreed Framework, and triggered the so-called second nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. In December 2007, U.S. technicians detected traces of enriched uranium on aluminum tubes North Korea provided to U.S. officials in November. While the incident served to reinforce suspicions of Pyongyang's UEP, Washington later decided to give North Korea the benefit of the doubt, accepting its claim that the tubes in question had been imported years ago for use in conventional weapons systems. The issue of proliferation activities became more acute in the wake of an Israeli air strike in September 2007 against a

Syrian nuclear facility which was suspected to have been constructed with North Korean assistance.

III. NORTH KOREA NUCLEAR DECLARATION: TENSIONS AND COMPROMISE

Amid the ongoing impasse over declaration, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Christopher Hill, met with his North Korean counterpart Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's vice-foreign minister, at the North Korean embassy in Beijing on February 19, 2008, and again in Geneva from March 13-14, to try to resolve differences over Pyongyang's obligations concerning declaration. Meetings, however, were unsuccessful in finding agreement on how to handle the two key issues of contention: UEP and proliferation activities.

Hill and Kim met again in Singapore on April 8 and finally reached a compromise on how to list the North's nuclear programs. The new format consisted of a formal declaration of the plutonium-based program and a separate confidential document in which the North would "acknowledge" U.S. concerns about the North's UEP and proliferation activities. This alternative was suggested by Hill, who saw it as the only viable option to break the deadlock and press forward with the six-party process.

On April 24, U.S. administration and intelligence officials briefed Congress and the public on their assessment that the Syrian nuclear reactor destroyed in an Israeli attack in September 2007 had, in fact, been under construction with North Korean assistance. The timing of this briefing seemed somewhat awkward, as the declaration that Hill was negotiating was to cover North Korea's nuclear cooperation with Syria. Therefore, in response to such concerns, the administration indicated that this information could help boost Washington's leverage in talks with Pyongyang and that Pyongyang had already been aware that this issue would be publicized by the United States.

In the wake of the CIA briefing, criticism of the administration's approach to North Korea from congressional Republicans in particular, became more pronounced. Following a provisional deal in Singapore, U.S. Special Envoy for the

Six-Party Talks, Sung Kim, and other U.S. officials went on a three-day trip to Pyongyang on May 8 to finalize the declaration. On May 10, their last day in North Korea, Kim walked across the heavily fortified border into South Korea hand-carrying seven boxes containing over 18,000 pages of documents. The submitted documents reportedly contained three major campaigns to reprocess plutonium for nuclear weapons - 1990, 2003 and 2005 - as well as operations records, production logs and receipts from two key nuclear facilities at Yongbyon since the beginning of their operations in 1986. The submission of these sensitive records came weeks before Pyongyang's official declaration to China, the host of the Six-Party Talks, and was hailed by many as a sign that the hostile relations between Washington and Pyongyang had relaxed somewhat. It was seen as a great leap forward in the stalled denuclearization process.

Apparently reinforcing the overall positive mood created by the North's long-awaited document transfer, the U.S. federal aid agency announced on May 13 that it would resume provision of food aid to North Korea over two years: 50,000 metric tons of food would be shipped to the North over a 12-month period beginning in June 2008. Moreover, the White House stated that food delivery would be conducted irrespective of future developments in nuclear negotiations.

Hold-ups over Japanese Abductees

While Washington and Pyongyang were making progress, Tokyo and Pyongyang remained frozen over disputes on the issue of Japanese abductees. The abduction issue had been an insurmountable focal point in the disarmament negotiations for Japan, and North Korea simply refused to address the topic, claiming that the cases had all been closed. Eight of the 17 abductees on Japan's official list had already been reported dead by North Korean authorities, five survivors were repatriated in 2002, and four others had reportedly never entered the country, a claim which Japan viewed with great skepticism. In response to Japan's persistence on the abduction issue, North Korea pushed back with demands for Japan to make reparations for its past colonization of the Korean peninsula.

The ultimate goal sought by Pyongyang through the six-party process has been the normalization of relations with the United States. Pyongyang's removal from the terrorism black list would lay the ground work for that to happen. Japan,

however, has been adamant that resolution of the abduction issue should precede this delisting. Citing North Korea's failure to address the abduction issue, Japan has consistently opposed rewarding Pyongyang with any form of aid, economic or political, including its commitments under six-party agreements. Japan's reluctance to normalize relations with North Korea over the abductee issue has made the U.S. also hesitant to act, not wanting to betray a key ally, and thus, causing a chain reaction of delays in the six-party process.

In an effort to break this stalemate, a trilateral meeting among top delegates from Japan (Akitaka Saiki, director general of Japan's foreign ministry), South Korea (Kim Sook, special representative for Korean peninsula peace and security affairs of the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), and the United States (Christopher Hill) was held from May 18-19 in Washington, D.C., to discuss a range of issues such as North Korea's nuclear declaration and verification, and the upcoming round of Six-Party Talks. This meeting was also intended to elicit Japan's cooperation in fulfilling its obligations under the six-party agreements. However, this meeting concluded having made little progress on the issue.

Breakthrough on the Declaration

On June 26, the DPRK Ambassador to China, Choe Jin-su, handed a list of its nuclear programs over to Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Wu Dawei, chair of the Six-Party Talks. On that same day, President Bush responded to the submission of this long-overdue declaration by proceeding to lift restrictions applied to North Korea associated with the Trading with the Enemy Act and to give formal notice (as required by U.S. law) to Congress of his intention to remove Pyongyang from the list of state sponsors of terrorism after 45 days. Washington had placed North Korea on its terrorism list in 1988 following the North Korean bombing of a South Korean passenger jetliner. This delisting would have great implications for North Korea's economic future and was eagerly coveted by Pyongyang. Under the designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, North Korea was subject to economic sanctions and trade embargoes, which made it ineligible for aid and loans from international financial institutions, such as the World Bank. Delisting then, would open new sources of aid and engagement to North Korea.

As it turned out, the declaration lacked clarity not least in terms of suspected UEP

and the extent to which the North had shared its nuclear technology with other countries. The North simply acknowledged U.S. concerns about those two issues in a confidential document and specified its plutonium-based program in a formal declaration, as previously agreed upon with the United States. More specifically, North Korea declared to have extracted about 38 kilograms of plutonium, of which it reported having used 26 kilograms in making nuclear weapons and another two kilograms in testing a nuclear device in October 2006.

A day after the DPRK's submission of its declaration, it blasted a cooling tower at the Yongbyon facility in what seemed to be a carefully choreographed public relations stunt. Sung Kim and a high-ranking North Korean foreign ministry official were present at the scene, along with journalists from the other six-party member countries who had been invited to cover the explosion. Attached to the five-megawatt nuclear reactor, the tower was a key facility used to cool the heat of the nuclear reactor when nuclear fission took place. Steam coming off the tower into the air had, in the past, been captured in satellite images and had been the most observable sign of plant's operations. The apparatus, however, had become in effect, superfluous, as its operations had ceased in July 2007 as part of the ongoing disablement process. In fact, the blowing-up of the cooling tower, for which Pyongyang billed the United States \$2.5 million, had not even been included in the second-phase actions under the October 3 Agreement. This gesture, however, held symbolic value nonetheless. By volunteering to explode this facility, North Korea appeared to be making a public statement that if the United States stuck to its commitments under the October 3 Agreement, it would also commit to its obligations under the denuclearization deal and respond with even more drastic actions on an "action for action" basis. North Korea may also have intended to present Washington a gift of "diplomatic achievement," silencing U.S. hardliners who denounced what they called the administration's excessive concessions to the North. In hindsight, this event actually marked the highest point ever reached in the six-party process.

IV. DISPUTES OVER VERIFICATION PROTOCOL

The Six-Party Talks reconvened in Beijing on July 10 for three days after a nine-month hiatus. Dynamics among six-party members since the previous round of

talks had changed dramatically: the two Koreas having become more hostile toward each other and the United States and the DPRK more open for active dialogue. Inter-Korean relations had begun to sour when conservative President Lee Myung-bak took office in February 2008, implementing hardline policies against the North. In late March, South Korea also endorsed the UN Human Rights Council's resolution against North Korea's human rights violations and approved the extension of the mandate for a special rapporteur. Under the past decade of liberal administrations, South Korea had either abstained or stayed away from voting on such issues in order not to provoke its communist neighbor. Tensions between the two Koreas were raised further after the shooting death of a South Korean tourist at Mount Geumgang in North Korea by a North Korean soldier on July 11.

During the July round of talks, the six parties each agreed to fulfill "in parallel" their respective commitments to fulfill HFO shipments and complete disablement by the end of October, as well as to work out a binding provision for non-HFO delivery by the same date. The parties also reached consensus on basic principles for verifying North Korea's declaration and issued a joint communiqué, which contained a vague outline for a verification protocol. The specific verification measures were then delegated to working group negotiations. The agreed verification mechanism involved visits to facilities, document reviews, and interviews with technical personnel. The July 12 statement also indicated that the inspection mechanism would involve experts from the six parties, limiting the role of IAEA inspectors to the area of "consultancy and assistance."

While in Beijing, the United States conveyed a four-page draft protocol to the DPRK, a document showing what a final version of the verification protocol would look like. The draft protocol reportedly provided highly rigorous inspection measures entailing full access to all materials and all sites, regardless of whether a site was included in the North's declaration or not. This meant that inspectors would be given unimpeded access to undeclared facilities as well as military sites. Moreover, the proposal demanded "international standards" be applied in the process, meaning IAEA inspectors would lead the implementation of the protocol.

Not surprisingly, however, North Korea rebuffed the proposal saying that the

draft inspection procedures were “too intrusive” and that the access provisions were “coercive.” It adamantly opposed the involvement of IAEA inspectors in the verification process on the grounds that it had withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the IAEA itself, and that it had conducted a nuclear test outside the NPT.

The draft proposal had been based on advice from arms control experts from the U.S. Department of State, and presented to North Korea despite strong reservations from China and Russia about its intrusive nature, especially considering North Korea’s reclusive, xenophobic tendencies. Japan, on the other hand, echoed the sentiments therein for a rigorous verification protocol.

Such a stringent verification draft actually reflected the growing voice of hardliners in the Bush administration. Republican neoconservatives, especially former Vice President Dick Cheney and John Bolton, former ambassador to the United Nations, had represented the mainstream of President Bush’s first-term North Korea policy. Their claim was that North Korea had no intention of abandoning its nuclear weapons and that it was only blackmailing Washington and other negotiating partners to subsidize its failing economy while trying to drag out the talks until the Bush administration left office. Deeply troubled by the administration’s willingness to hold direct negotiations with North Korea, hawkish politicians dismissed Pyongyang’s declaration and complained that the government was repeatedly lowering the bar by not insisting on a “complete and correct” declaration, simply to maintain momentum for the negotiation process. From the critics’ view, a major flaw of the initial accord with North Korea was that it lacked rigorous provisions for verification of not only its plutonium-based program but also its suspected UEP and nuclear proliferation activities. They also claimed that although Pyongyang may abide by their commitments to disable and dismantle its Yongbyon nuclear facilities, the Soviet-era nuclear reactor was already too dilapidated for sustainable operation.

With Washington awaiting Pyongyang’s official response to the draft protocol, foreign ministers from the six parties gathered in Singapore on July 23, on the sidelines of the Southeast Asian security forum. U.S. Secretary of State Rice held one-on-one talks with North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Ui-chun, in the highest-level encounter between the two sides in four years.

In the meantime, some progress seemed to be in the making over the long-stalled issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals as well, as North Korea agreed at the end of the bilateral meeting held from August 11-13 to reopen investigations into the issue in June and subsequently start a probe. In return, Japan committed itself to easing part of its economic sanctions and lifting certain travel restrictions against North Koreans once the investigation began. This switch of Pyongyang's heretofore "nonchalant" policy toward the abduction issue appeared to have stemmed from its desire to increase the likelihood of being delisted, but later fizzled out upon the resignation of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda.

Failure to Delist and Reversal of the Disablement Process

Even though the United States could have rescinded North Korea's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism on August 11 under U.S. law, the administration declined to do so, citing the North's failure to agree on a verification protocol. Washington felt that the apparent incompleteness of Pyongyang's declaration warranted a rigorous inspection mechanism to verify the contents of the declaration. Washington considered verification an important step to ensure that Pyongyang was not hiding any undeclared, clandestine nuclear weapons program, and asserted that it should be a second-phase requirement and thus, a pre-requisite for delisting as well.

The DPRK's claim, on the other hand, was that the U.S.-generated verification protocol was something that amounted to an infringement on its sovereignty. Furthermore, it was not obligated to address verification at all; at least not until after phase two was complete since verification was not a second-phase requirement under the October 3 Agreement in the first place. From Pyongyang's perspective, Washington's refusal to delist it even after submitting its declaration seemed like a slap in the face after it had gone out of its way to topple the cooling tower. In its eyes, the United States violated the principle of "action for action" by renegeing on its pledge to rescind it from the terrorism list despite its fulfillment of obligations regarding declaration and even after U.S. Congress had given its tacit approval by not blocking the motion during the 45-day notification period.

Condemning Washington for delisting delays, the infuriated DPRK almost

immediately proceeded to stop the disablement process at Yongbyon, and on September 24 removed IAEA seals and surveillance cameras from its reprocessing facility before restricting international inspectors from its reactor site. North Korea then reportedly took steps toward reversing the disabling activities at Yongbyon, triggering international fear of another North Korean nuclear crisis.

Such alarming actions coincided with reports that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il had suffered an apparent stroke. This piece of news raised fears of a possible take-over by North Korea's hawkish military and an ensuing policy change to a harder stance in relation to the disarmament deal.

As the issue of verification emerged to block the actual delisting, the showdown became even more visible between engagers and hardliners within the Bush administration. Ambassador Hill and his aides argued strongly against what they viewed as excessively far-reaching provisions of the protocol, only to be overridden by his seniors. Some high ranking officials, in fact, were deeply convinced that a rigorous verification regime could be a litmus test of Pyongyang's genuine intentions. Undeterred by such objections, however, Hill increasingly pushed the envelope over months of negotiations, persuading President Bush and Secretary of State Rice to compromise in a way that pared back U.S. demands on Pyongyang and reflected Pyongyang's wishes, to some degree, in regards to inspection provisions.

With the denuclearization deal being in danger of collapsing, Hill traveled to Pyongyang on October 1 hoping to dissuade the North from restarting its nuclear facilities and resolve disputes over the verification arrangement. Around the time of his visit, two unconfirmed reports were released by the South Korean media on North Korea's ongoing restoration of the underground nuclear site in Punggye and the ballistic test site in Musudan, elevating international concerns about potential missile launches and another nuclear test. Such provocative actions on the part of North Korea were apparently designed to up the ante in the verification negotiations with Washington.

Following Hill's visit to Pyongyang, the United States announced on October 11 a verification agreement with North Korea and its decision to take Pyongyang off the terrorism black list, breaking a two-month-long stalemate. President Bush,

seemingly desperate to avoid a crisis situation in the waning days of his presidency, decided to take a gamble and pressed forward with the rescission after the North had agreed to a verification plan and to the resumption of the disablement process. Such moves came despite concerns over strong backlash from Japan and administrative hawks for the compromised deal with Pyongyang. Upon the announcement, Japanese officials expressed deep frustration at what they called America's "peculiarly abrupt" decision and warned of its potentially adverse impact on the Japan-U.S. alliance. Calling the matter a "formality," Secretary of State Rice noted that various other sanctions against North Korea would remain in effect. The following day, North Korea announced its resumption of disablement work.

Preliminary Verification Agreement

According to the tentative verification agreement, inspectors would have access to all declared sites and, "based on mutual consent," to undeclared facilities, and would employ scientific methods, such as sampling and forensic activities. The agreed protocol also stipulated a broad application of verification measures to the North's plutonium-based program as well as "any uranium enrichment and proliferation activities," although administration officials admitted that inspectors initially would focus more on the plutonium program. North Korea reportedly remained most jittery on two key points: inspectors' access to undeclared facilities and the collection of environmental samples. It also took exception to the non-nuclear states, namely Japan and South Korea, participating in the inspection activities, but finally agreed to the protocol involving experts from all six-party members. Despite Washington's assurance that the agreement satisfied all U.S. requirements for inspections in North Korea, parts of the provisions seemed somewhat inconsistent with the initial draft protocol. For example, the draft document stipulated full access "upon request" to any site, facility or location, whether or not a site was declared, but that inspectors would have access to undeclared sites "based on mutual consent," indicating a virtual restriction to such facilities.

In fact, not only hardliners, but other observers were also concerned about the possibility of Pyongyang pulling bait and switch tactics with sanctions already lifted. Analysts indicated what seemed like several loopholes in the agreement.

For instance, parts of the agreed protocol concerning access to undeclared sites and the sampling seemed ambiguous, or potentially highly contentious. The sampling provision, for instance, avoided specifics as to whether international inspectors would be allowed to take samples out of the country for analysis in overseas laboratories. The verification agreement also consisted of written and verbal components and it was unclear at the time, which parts of the agreement had been made only verbally, and which parts in the form of a joint written agreement. Administration officials later admitted that the purported protocol had been mostly an oral agreement between Hill and North Korean officials.

Nevertheless, the concessions made by the United States to yield to the verification agreement with the DPRK seemed somewhat necessary to salvage the fragile denuclearization deal and keep the process going, but the overall deal appeared to almost guarantee another deadlock in the six-party process.

V. NORTH KOREA'S DENIAL AND THE YEAR'S LAST ROUND OF SIX-PARTY TALKS

On November 12, a month after it was formally delisted, North Korea denied that any such agreement on verification had been made with Washington, particularly on the issue of sampling. In its foreign ministry statement, North Korea claimed that the agreed protocol limited verification procedures to "field visits, confirmation of documents, and interviews with technicians," a claim flying in the face of the State Department's October announcement that Pyongyang approved the use of "scientific procedures, including sampling and forensic activities." Washington, however, had no written documentation to prove otherwise. Pyongyang's denial drew vociferous criticism from domestic hardliners that the administration had erred in rescinding the North from the terrorism black list without securing a stringent verification protocol.

With any breakthrough in the six-party process seemingly elusive at best, Christopher Hill and Kim Kye-gwan held bilateral sessions in Singapore on December 4 to narrow gaps on verification. On December 7, in a Bush administration's "last-ditch" effort to salvage the crumbling deal, the last round of the Six-Party Talks in 2008 was held in Beijing. Even after four days of grueling

negotiations, the six parties failed to reach consensus on verification protocol. North Korea remained most unyielding over the issue of sampling, vehemently refusing to allow outside inspectors to take nuclear samples from its nuclear complex. Analysts suspected that North Korea was simply waiting out the Bush administration, preferring to deal with the incoming Obama administration instead. With the time left in President Bush's term in office being only one month or so, Washington aimed to wrap up the protracted second phase of the accord by adopting a comprehensive verification mechanism, so that the next administration could start from the beginning of phase three: the full dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program. Pyongyang, however, seemingly wanted to defer the issue of verification to the next phase of the disarmament deal so that it could be renegotiated in line with progress made on the subsequent implementation and that it could wield significant leverage in future talks.

VI. DISABLEMENT STATUS AT THE END OF 2008

By the year's end, the disablement of the three key nuclear facilities at Yongbyon was reportedly about 90 percent complete. Of the total 8,000 spent fuel rods, about 5,000 rods had been removed from the reactor when North Korea announced another slowdown of fuel rod removal in November. The pace of unloading spent fuel rods from Yongbyon's five-megawatt reactor was slowed from the rate of 80 rods per day at the beginning of the year, to 30 rods per day in February, and to 15 rods per day in November. In February, about 2,000 rods had been discharged, meaning that a total of about 3,000 spent fuel rods were unloaded in 2008.

While Pyongyang's slowdown decisions from August through October were mainly attributed to Washington's delay in the list removal, such decisions in February, June and November ostensibly resulted from the postponed provision of energy aid commitments by the five other party members. North Korea ceaselessly complained of continued procrastination in shipments of energy aid, which it said had fallen way behind the progress made on its disablement actions.

By the end of 2008, the DPRK had reportedly received a total of 450,000 tons of HFO and 147,000 tons of HFO equivalent. Of this, the United States had shipped its entire share of 200,000 tons. Russia contributed a total of 150,000 tons and

reported its last batch of 50,000 tons to be following shortly. China had delivered 50,000 tons of HFO as well as part of its share of non-HFO assistance, and announced a plan to deliver its remaining share of oil equivalent aid worth 99,000 tons of HFO by the end of January 2009. South Korea, for its part, shipped the initial batch of 50,000 tons as part of its phase-one commitment under the February 2007 agreement and another 124,000 tons of HFO equivalent assistance in the form of steel plates.

When the last round of Six-Party Talks in 2008 was broken off, the U.S. Department of State announced that the other four parties had agreed to suspend the delivery of energy assistance to North Korea without a verification agreement. However, it turned out that this statement was not wholly representative, as China and Russia almost immediately issued counterstatements refuting this claim. Instead, these two countries announced their planned energy delivery schedule so that they could finalize their remaining share of energy shipments by roughly the end of January 2009. South Korea, on the other hand, was reportedly reconsidering its remaining shipment of 3,000 tons of steel plates. While China and Russia associated their delivery of energy assistance with the progress on disablement, South Korea appeared to link the energy provision to progress on verification. Meanwhile, during the December talks in Beijing, North Korea, which had vowed to ignore Japan shortly before the talks, snarled at the country and condemned Japan for not joining the other parties in providing energy aid. Prior to the December round, the United States and South Korea had reportedly discussed ways to make up for Japan's share of fuel oil with other countries including Australia and New Zealand, but the disputes over verification made things uncertain.

VII. CONCLUSION

Washington's diplomacy-oriented North Korea policy during the last two years of the Bush administration resulted in North Korea's ongoing disablement of its nuclear facilities and its submission of a nuclear declaration. In response, in line with the "action for action" principle, the United States rescinded North Korea from the state sponsor of terrorism list. However, despite what seemed to be great progress in the denuclearization of North Korea, things stalled abruptly over

verification disputes. By the end of 2008, several steps outlined in the February and October agreements were complete, but the issues that remain have the potential to unravel everything that was accomplished throughout the year.

Under these circumstances, preserving the progress that has been made would be the first challenge facing the incoming Obama administration. The latest failure at the Six-Party Talks to adopt a written verification protocol seems to portend an even more precarious path ahead in bilateral or multilateral negotiations with North Korea.

America's new President, Barack Obama, spoke on his campaign trail about the need for "sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy" to deal with North Korea. His choice of Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, suggests that they will follow a principle of "smart power," that is, diplomacy as a first priority and military force as a last resort. This leads to a cautious forecast for the new administration's North Korea policy: a determined pursuit of verifiable denuclearization through tough and direct diplomacy under a multilateral framework, while being ready to punish noncompliance or any other wayward behaviors. Since the Six-Party Talks launched in 2003, it has gone through a number of vicissitudes. Given the complexity of denuclearizing North Korea, the road ahead might be equally or even more perilous and uncertain than it has been thus far.

CHRONOLOGY

- Dec 31, 2007* North Korea misses a year-end deadline to provide a declaration of its nuclear programs and to disable its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.
- January 4, 2008* North Korea issues a foreign ministry statement claiming that it already submitted the nuclear declaration in November 2007.
- February 19* Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill has bilateral talks with North Korean Vice-Minister Kim Kye-gwan in Beijing to discuss the issue of declaration.

- March 13-14* Hill and Kim meet in Geneva. A compromise is made on the format of the declaration.
- April 8* Hill and Kim meet in Singapore to further discuss North Korea's upcoming declaration. Agreement is made on a compromised format.
- April 24* U.S. intelligence officials brief Congress on the result of their investigations into the Syrian nuclear facility attacked by an Israeli air strike in September 2007.
- May 8-10* North Korea conveys to a U.S. delegation over 18,000 pages documenting the operations of its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.
- June 26* North Korea submits its official declaration to China. In return, President Bush lifts the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act with regard to the DPRK and notifies Congress of his intent to delist North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism.
- June 27* North Korea topples a cooling tower at Yongbyon
- July 10-12* Six-Party Talks are held in Beijing. Consensus is reached on the principle of a verification protocol.
- July 23* Foreign ministers from the six-party members convene in Singapore in informal sessions alongside the Southeast Asian Security Forum. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice meets face-to-face with North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Ui-chun.
- August 11* On the first day that North Korea's removal from the terrorism black list could come into effect, the United States refuses to conduct the delisting.
- August 26* North Korea announces suspension of the disablement process in Yongbyon.

- September 19* North Korea announces restoration activities underway at its nuclear complex in Yongbyon.
- September 22* North Korea removes IAEA seals and cameras from its reactor site
- September 24* North Korea bars international inspectors from its nuclear reprocessing plant in Yongbyon.
- October 1-3* Hill travels to Pyongyang in a last attempt to save the disarmament process.
- October 11* The United States removes the DPRK from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.
- October 12* North Korea announces its resumption of disablement efforts in Yongbyon.
- November 12* North Korean Foreign Ministry issues a statement that denies having agreed to verification measures the United States.
- December 8-11* China chairs the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. Russia brings up a "Draft for Basic Principles of a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism," which summarizes the results of discussions to date. The six-party process has since stalled as North Korea refused to sign a verification protocol.