



NOTE D'ACTUALITE / OP-ED

« The North-Korean-Syrian Connection: Take It Seriously But Address It Wisely »

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The release of photographs of what U.S. officials say was a Syrian nuclear reactor built with North Korean assistance (and destroyed by Israel in September 2007) could undermine the success of ongoing negotiations with Pyongyang about its nuclear weapons activities.

In addition to pressing Syria to admit its nuclear ambitions, the Bush Administration argues that the disclosure of these photographs will pressure Pyongyang to honour its lagging non-proliferation commitments laid out in a six-party agreement reached in February 2007. The problem is that this could also bring current negotiations to a breakdown. In other words, in the face of U.S. confrontation, North Korean officials could simply decide to walk out of the negotiating table altogether.

In the recent past, the absence of a negotiating process with Pyongyang had dramatic consequences. Following the collapse of negotiations in 2002 (when Washington confronted Pyongyang with an alleged clandestine uranium enrichment program), North Korea moved swiftly to unfreeze its plutonium production facilities, expel international inspectors, withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), restart its reprocessing activities and, finally, conduct a nuclear test in October 2006.

During this period, the possibility of war and regional proliferation increased and many proliferation experts worried that the financially

strapped Communist regime would attempt to sell its nuclear technology to anyone willing to buy it, including terrorist groups.

A negotiating process was finally restored with the February 2007 agreement, which the Bush Administration hailed as a major breakthrough. Nearly fifteen months down the track, Pyongyang has closed and almost entirely disabled its main nuclear reactor (Yongbyon). But it has missed key deadlines to provide detailed information on its stocks of plutonium and nuclear weapons, its uranium enrichment program as well as a complete accounting of its past proliferation activities.

Does this mean, as a result, that the U.S. should move towards a showdown with North Korea over alleged nuclear proliferation activities with Syria? Clearly, the answer is no. The North Korean nuclear problem is far from solved, but the world is safer now that the Yongbyon complex is almost entirely disabled. Moreover, Pyongyang has promised to end its proliferation activities and there is no evidence that nuclear cooperation between Syria and North Korea has continued after the reactor was destroyed in September 2007.

Evidently, the North Korean-Syrian connection will need to be thoroughly examined by the international community. But as one observer has indicated, it is essential to do so within the framework of the six-party agreement because that process brings North Korea, slowly but surely, into the fold and makes it harder for its leaders to engage in further proliferation activities.

Success against nuclear proliferation should not be narrowly defined as the administration of “curative treatments”. It can also be defined as the palliation or alleviation of the effects of proliferation, pending a potential cure. Today, the mere existence and maintenance of the six-party negotiating process to address the North Korean nuclear problem should be considered a success. In a catchphrase, in this case, process alone equates success.

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