

A Turning Point in the North Korean Nuclear Dispute

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The signing of a statement of principles at the latest round of six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue came as a surprise to many. Earlier meetings had failed to bridge the differences between the U.S. and North Korea, and the Bush Administration had put most of its energies into isolating and pressuring the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK – the formal name for North Korea]. The diplomatic process had collapsed more than a year before over the Bush Administration's one-sided demands for North Korean disarmament without anything of substance being offered in return, and U.S. efforts to persuade other nations to support sanctions. It was all the more surprising then, that the parties were able to come to an agreement on principles in Beijing in September. While the actual content of the document appears unremarkable, the process that led to its signing has broader implications for the future, having dealt a stunning setback for the Bush Administration's objectives in the region.

With the diplomatic process having ground to a halt, South Korea pursued a two-track policy of expanding cooperation with the DPRK and encouraging the U.S. to adopt a more flexible approach. Relations between the two Koreas had warmed considerably over the previous few years and great strides had been made towards the mutually desired goal of reunification. As envisioned in both the North and South, reunification will be based on mutually respectful terms, perhaps as a confederation leading eventually to a federation, rather than on the German model. Neither Korea wishes to see the reunification process advance according to the Bush Administration's dreams, on the point of a bayonet or by sanctions-induced collapse, but on Korean terms, based on gradual integration and mutually agreed steps.

Despite U.S. interference in the demining of the border, substantial progress has been made on linking roads and railways joining the two Koreas, and connections to traffic have been opened on a trial basis. The centerpiece of inter-Korean affiliation is construction of a gigantic industrial complex at Kaesong, located just 37 miles north of Seoul in North Korea. The first firms have already begun production, and by 2011 it is expected that Kaesong will be home to more than 2,000 plants. At completion the complex will employ as many as 725,000 people in the North and 104,000 in the South. Although the desire to advance reunification is the primary goal for both governments, profit will be a strong motivation for South Korean corporations. North Korean regulations governing the complex mandate certain protections for workers, but average wages will start at \$50 per month plus a social welfare fee of \$7.50. It remains to be seen how effective the North Korean labor code will operate in practice. Chinese workers, too, are afforded legal protections and rights under a national labor code; rights which foreign-owned sweatshops routinely disregard. In addition to low wage labor, the DPRK has offered further incentives for South Korean firms, including a 14 percent cap on the corporate tax rate. For North Korea, there are significant risks involved in such an undertaking. Yet the project promises two salient benefits: first by

promoting reunification, and second as a means of gaining access to foreign exchange. For a nation under economic embargo and therefore lacking foreign currency, Kaesong could bring in enough capital to help fund the nation's economic recovery. By 2012 it is expected that North Korea will earn \$9.6 billion annually in hard currency from the operation. A move towards a mixed economy would be a compromise for North Korea, but one necessitated in part by embargo-induced economic difficulties. Since North Korea is unable to purchase sorely needed spare parts to repair and rehabilitate an aging infrastructure, an infusion of foreign exchange on that scale would do much to resuscitate its economy. (1)

The Bush Administration sought to impede the process by ordering South Korea not to ship "strategic goods" such as Pentium computers and telecommunications equipment to the Kaesong complex. South Korean analysts regarded the U.S. action as a way of using security concerns as a cover for blocking the flow of foreign currency into the DPRK. "Americans think improved business ties between South and North Korea, before any solution is found in the nuclear crisis, weakens the effect of what used to be a blockade policy against the North," observed Hong Ihk-Pyo of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy. It was essential to establish telephone links between Kaesong and South Korea for the industrial park to reach its full potential. A South Korean telecommunications firm applied for permission from the U.S. to install equipment at Kaesong, a request that was ignored. That left the firm with no means of completing its task unless it could find an alternative arrangement through a third country. There is also the problem of the extremely high tariffs Western countries place on North Korean goods, effectively eliminating many of the markets for products produced at Kaesong. "Negotiations are underway with related countries on how to label the products, and there's no problem selling in South Korea and Europe," said an official at Hyundai Asan. "But selling in the U.S. and Japan is a problem." (2) For Koreans, the Kaesong project has vast symbolic and actual significance for the major role it is expected to play as a linchpin of the reunification process.

In the early days of his second term, President Bush made a renewed effort to obstruct North-South economic cooperation. Both Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz instructed South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ban Ki-Moon not to give economic aid to the DPRK. Cheney bluntly said that he regarded any reciprocal deal by South Korea on economic cooperation with the North as "not acceptable." Strong pressure was applied on Ban to rescind South Korea's commitment to send fertilizer aid to North Korea. Christopher Hill, the newly appointed U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, travelled to South Korea where he called for "coordinated approaches" on economic cooperation and aid to the North. What the U.S. wanted in effect was veto power over agreements the South had already signed with the North. "The U.S. position that it cannot compensate for bad behavior is firm," blustered a U.S. State Department source. "The point where we could offer carrots to the North has already passed." But South Korea chose to put the needs of the Korean people first, and in May 2005 it began shipping 200,000 tons of fertilizer to the North. Similar efforts by the Bush Administration to pressure China into cutting off energy assistance and trade with North Korea also failed. This despite threats by U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Robert Joseph's warning that unless China agreed to U.S. demands, "there possibly could be very significant consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations." (3)

This was certainly not the first time the Bush Administration had attempted to bully other nations into following its dictates. Only the year before the U.S. had pressured South Korea to cut ties with the DPRK only to meet with rejection by South Korean President Roh Moo-

Hyun. Explaining South Korea's position, Roh said, "The United States wants us to join it in severing dialogue and exchanges with the North and putting pressure on the North. The U.S. strategy is adopting a stronger position. We, however, think it is more favorable for us to adopt a strategy of dialogue and engage North Korea concurrently." Roh regarded economic cooperation with the DPRK as a means of enhancing relations and peace in the region. (4) This was not a goal the Bush Administration shared. "On a range of issues, Washington and Seoul have increasingly divergent interests," observed a high-ranking official in the Bush Administration. "With the last generation of decision makers in Seoul believing that Washington is more of a threat than Pyongyang, the situation will almost certainly get worse." The U.S. preferred punitive measures. Bush Administration was not willing to drop the option of hostile options such as covert operations against North Korea, a U.S. official explained. As the administration's second-term Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice travelled to Asia, where she talked with officials about the possibility of asking the UN Security Council to impose international sanctions against North Korea. In an effort to ratchet up pressure on the DPRK, the U.S. sent 15 Stealth fighter-bombers to South Korea in mid-2005. The aim, said U.S. officials, was to send a message that the U.S. was capable of bombing North Korea. (5)

Rather than cave in to U.S. injunctions to curtail contacts with the DPRK, South Korea instead expanded cooperation. On June 4, 2004, military talks between the two Koreas ended with an agreement on measures to limit future naval clashes, including a telephone hot line and shared radio frequency. Both sides agreed to end propaganda broadcasts and to dismantle the loudspeaker systems along the Joint Security Area. Colonel Moon Sung-Mook of the South Korean delegation said the agreement "heralded an ease of military tensions and buildup of trust in the Korean Peninsula." The same week both Koreas agreed to permit their ships to visit each other's ports. (6)

With South Korea pressing ahead with cooperative projects and agreements with the North, the U.S. found itself sidelined by its own intransigence. South Korea, China and Russia increased aid levels to the DPRK. Yet the U.S. still maintained a powerful military and economic presence in the region and was a factor that could not be ignored. South Korea found itself in the delicate position of having to toe a fine line between a desire to accelerate integration with the North and cautious restraint so as not to antagonize the U.S. Pursuing the best interests of the Korean people while maintaining an alliance with the U.S. was regarded as essential, and in an unpopular move, President Roh sent troops to Iraq in support of the Anglo-American occupation. Statements by South Korean officials hinted that the troops were in effect bargaining chips, meant to give the U.S. something so that in return it would take into account the views of South Korea when dealing with the DPRK. The commitment to send troops to Iraq was an unsavory concession that may have enabled President Roh to dissuade the Bush Administration from imposing punitive measures against the North or even taking military action.

South Korean strategy hinged in part on restraining the hawks in Washington from plunging the peninsula into crisis. In 2004, the U.S. initiated talks with South Korea on developing a military operational plan for responding to internal turmoil in North Korea, including such scenarios as regime change, demonstrations or mass refugee flight. The plan called for military intervention by joint U.S.-South Korean forces into North Korea. In a move that angered U.S. military officials, the South Korean National Security Council (NSC) announced in January 2005 that it was terminating further discussions "because the plan could be a serious obstacle to exercising Korea's sovereignty." A NSC official said the government

could not accept the plan because “it stipulates military actions under U.S. command in event of internal crisis in the North, not simply North Korean aggression against the country.” South Korea worried that the plan would offer the Bush Administration a potential pretext for taking “hasty” military action that could lead to all-out war. (7)

Shortly after the reelection of President Bush, South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun made clear his intention to continue following an independent course in his speech before the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles. Roh flatly rejected the threat of military force. “It is too much to ask of the Korean people, who have risen from the ashes, to submit to the risk of a war again.” Roh explicitly rejected the possibility of an economic embargo, as this would “only prolong the sense of instability and threat indefinitely. The nuclear issue should be settled through the six-party talks.” A few days later at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Santiago, Chile, President Roh told Bush, “The North Korean nuclear issue is the most important thing to South Korea. I think it is necessary for the second Bush Administration to make the issue its number one priority and resolve the issue by close cooperation between Seoul and Washington in a peaceful, diplomatic way.” Roh was even more outspoken when he then travelled to Western Europe to garner crucial diplomatic support for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear dispute. “The United States and some Western countries harbor the idea that the North Korean system should collapse; that is why Pyongyang is nervous and in crisis mode. This will not resolve the nuclear standoff.” In the coordination of efforts in the six-party talks, “Seoul should have the strongest say. The nuclear issue is a problem that will determine the survival of South Koreans... No other countries can enforce their own solutions to the nuclear problem against the will of the Korean people.” (8)

It was due only to South Korea that the 13-month long deadlock was broken and the six-party talks were revived. As late as the June 10, 2005 summit between the U.S. and South Korean presidents, there was still sharp disagreement over policy. President Bush told Roh that it would be impossible to achieve a settlement through carrots alone. Sticks would have to be used. Bush argued that there should be a limit to the South’s policy of engagement with the North, while President Roh attempted to get the U.S. to commit to resolving the dispute through negotiations and not attack the North. South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Lee Tae-Shik asked the U.S. to tone down its rhetoric when referring to the DPRK. The South Koreans perceived U.S. belligerence as an impediment to a negotiated solution. North Korean authorities “think that the U.S. wants to overthrow their regime, so for them it is a matter of survival,” pointed out South Korean Minister for Unification Chung Dong-Young. “We tell the U.S. Government that it should concentrate on the problem of the denuclearization of North Korea and abandon its intention of regime change. Because the mix of these two objectives is explosive.” (9)

After the June 10th summit, South Korea launched a dramatic initiative intended to change the course of events. Since the collapse of the six-party talks the previous year, South Korea, China and Russia had implored the U.S. to improve on its offer to the North, to no avail. It was obvious that to allow the U.S. to continue setting the terms of the debate would only ensure diplomatic failure. During a visit to the DPRK, a South Korean delegation presented what it termed a “significant proposal.” If the DPRK would rejoin the six-party talks and agree to abandon nuclear weapons development, then the South would supply 2 million kilowatts of electrical power annually to the North, an amount equivalent to what the uncompleted light-water reactors would have provided. South Korea assured the North that it would not have to completely dismantle its nuclear program before aid would be supplied.

Construction of electrical transmission facilities and cross-border lines would begin as soon as an agreement was signed. (10)

As a further inducement, South Korea promised to ship half a million tons of rice to the North “in a spirit of brotherly love and humanitarianism,” not the sort of language which the hawks in Washington were likely to find palatable. Delegations from the two Koreas signed an historic document calling for “uniting the economic elements the two sides possess such as resources, capital and technology.” South Korea committed to supply raw materials to factories in the North producing commodities such as clothes, shoes and soap. In return, the South was given the right to jointly develop mining operations in the North. It was also agreed that there would be a pilot run on reconnected railroad links as a prelude to regular rail traffic between the two Koreas and the formal opening of restored road links. An office of economic cooperation between the two Koreas would also be opened at Kaesong. Only a few weeks later, during the lull in the fourth round of the six-party talks, the two Koreas signed an agreement on full-scale agricultural cooperation, including a joint farming area in the North and other agricultural projects. South Korea agreed to provide the North with fertilizer, pesticides and farming equipment. “The two Koreas will push for joint projects step by step on the basis of mutual respect and trust,” announced South Korean Vice Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Lee Myung-Soo. Already, North Korea’s agriculture agricultural output had shown a remarkable recovery, due in part to South Korea’s provision of fertilizer. By 2004, production had soared more than 50 percent over the level of five years before, nearly matching the peak output achieved in the late 1980’s. The recovery of the agricultural sector, coupled with the agreement with South Korea on agricultural cooperation, allowed North Korea to inform the World Food Program that it no longer needed food assistance. What it wanted to see international organizations focus on was not food aid but development assistance in the production of crops. (11)

Washington meanwhile was hinting darkly that it might take “other” measures and it was clear that the initiative would have to be seized from the U.S. in the interests of peace and stability. Seoul had demonstrated breathtaking pluck in grabbing the reins and setting a new agenda that would make the resumption of negotiations a reality. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il had come to the conclusion that further attempts to negotiate with the U.S. would be fruitless as long as President Bush remained in office, and he had resolved to wait for the next administration to take office before renewing efforts to resolve the dispute. But South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-Young changed Kim’s mind through patient encouragement and by emphasizing recent statements by President Bush indicating that force would not be used against the DPRK and that he wished for a peaceful outcome. Those statements, it should be pointed out, had been made only through the persistent efforts of the South Koreans to get President Bush to adopt a more conciliatory public language, without which the U.S. could not count on South Korean, Chinese and Russian support. The DPRK responded to the South’s proffered hand of friendship by announcing that it would return to the six-party talks. “South Korea, they are the ones who made this work,” observed an Asian diplomat. This dramatic turn of events left the U.S. with no option but to follow South Korea’s lead. Even so, the Bush Administration’s philosophy had not changed. As North Korea was preparing to accept South Korea’s request to return to the six-party talks, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced, “We are not talking about enhancement of the current proposal.” The U.S. would stick to its demand for unilateral concessions by the DPRK. (12)

As the fourth round of six-party talks opened in Beijing on July 26, 2005, it soon became obvious that there would be a more cordial atmosphere than was customary. Christopher Hill had replaced James Kelly as head of the American delegation, and senior administration officials had granted him permission to engage in direct dialogue with the North Korean delegation, something his predecessor had been enjoined against. Hill's style was also noticeably less abrasive than Kelly's had been. Although the U.S. delegation was exhibiting a more flexible approach to discussions, little else had changed. North Korea would have to complete the process of nuclear disarmament and meet a series of additional demands related to extraneous issues before it could expect security guarantees, energy assistance and normalization of relations. (13)

Kim Kye-Gwan was again head of the North Korean delegation, and he characterized the U.S. plan presented at the previous year's talks as unreasonably one-sided in that it required unilateral disarmament before any corresponding measures would be taken. Kim advocated a more even-handed approach. "Any promises to be agreed upon should be carried out step by step, starting with the easiest one to be implemented first." The South Koreans agreed, saying that any document resulting from the talks should be based on the concept of "words for words and action for action." The South Koreans thought they had reached consensus on just such an approach when they met with the Americans and Japanese two weeks before in Seoul where a draft proposal was developed. But Christopher Hill caught the South Koreans by surprise when he jettisoned the agreed-upon proposal and instead reiterated the usual rigid demands. The U.S. delegation had discarded the security guarantees and lifting of sanctions that the South Koreans felt would have found favor with the DPRK delegation. In their place the U.S. had inserted a host of conditions unrelated to the nuclear issue that North Korea would have to first fulfill before it could expect normalized relations. "Hill was going to resolve the nuclear issue with a changed attitude, but it appears that conservatives got to him during discussions in the United States," a South Korean official remarked afterwards. "Our side expressed displeasure during their meeting with the U.S. side, telling them, 'With this kind of content, how can we come up with a joint written agreement?'" The South Korean delegation reminded the Americans that money for energy assistance to the DPRK would come from South Korea and neighboring countries "and all the United States has to do is verbally guarantee it, but it isn't doing so." (14)

Predictably, the U.S. delegation once again raised the issue of a secret uranium enrichment program, with the North Koreans countering that their nation had neither a military nor a civilian nuclear program based on uranium enrichment. The North Koreans had their own suspicions, and pointed out that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula must by definition take into account U.S. nuclear weapons and policy. U.S. nuclear weapons staged in South Korea or offshore would have to be removed. The American delegation responded that the subject was "off-topic," and said the U.S. had removed its nuclear weapons from the South in 1991. The North Koreans, however, were aware of reports that declassified U.S. documents had revealed that despite such claims, the U.S. had in fact continued to station nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula at least through 1998, the latest date of the documents. Whether those weapons were still in South Korea was not known. It was also known that U.S. policy specifically called for the potential use of nuclear weapons against North Korea in the event of conflict, and offshore submarines and aircraft would be capable of delivering nuclear charges. The North Korean delegation regarded any talk of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula without addressing the U.S. side of the equation as a deliberate distortion of the concept. Certainly, the nascent state of the DPRK's nuclear

program paled in comparison with the bristling U.S. nuclear arsenal. North Korea pledged that it would dismantle its nuclear weapons program in a verifiable manner if the U.S. would renounce the goal of seeking regime change in North Korea, remove its nuclear threat and normalize relations. Unless it could be assured that it would not be the object of attack or covert operations, the DPRK could not relinquish its most effective form of protection. The U.S. response was unbending. North Korea had to disarm before it could expect compensating steps. "The United States is asking North Korea to give up its nuclear program before getting any benefits," observed South Korean delegation member Cho Tae-Young, "and North Korea is balking at it. This is the main obstacle." (15)

Despite the U.S. delegation's newfound willingness to engage in bilateral meetings with the North Koreans, talks foundered on the issue of a civilian nuclear program. The U.S. delegation was demanding that North Korea refrain from developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The North Koreans were unwilling to give up that right, and pledged to return to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) after reaching a settlement. International law is unequivocal on the matter, and the NPT affirms the principle that nuclear technology "should be available for peaceful purposes to all parties of the treaty." It is the "inalienable right of all the parties to the treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination." All parties to the treaty, therefore, have the right to develop nuclear energy and that right cannot be taken away. North Korea need only return to the NPT. The North Koreans regarded the U.S. demand as insulting, which in fact it was. "We want to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula but we seek peaceful use," asserted North Korean delegation head Kim Kye-Gwan. "All countries in the world have the right to peaceful nuclear activities. We are not a defeated nation in war and we have committed no crime so why should we not be able to conduct peaceful nuclear activities?" A larger problem loomed over the talks, even though comparatively little time was spent on discussion. The draft statement circulated for discussion skirted the issue of timing on the implementation of steps by the two sides. This placed the problematic U.S. demand for unilateral concessions on the back burner, allowing the subject of peaceful nuclear energy to become the focus of attention. The six-party talks bogged down over this matter and came to a close on the thirteenth day with an announcement that the parties would resume negotiations after a recess. (16)

The matter continued to be the subject of hot debate over the recess, and Kim Kye-Gwan stressed that a nuclear energy program would be appropriate "in the light of the economic situation in our country." North Korea was willing to allay any fears the U.S. might have in regard to this program. After a settlement of the nuclear dispute is reached, Kim said, "we are willing to return to the NPT and fully abide by IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards." North Korea would be willing to place its nuclear facilities under the "strict supervision" of the United States or any nation of its choosing. The U.S. could even participate in the operation of these plants. Japan was the only nation to back the U.S. position that North Korea should be denied nuclear power plants, while the other parties supported North Korea's right under international law. A member of the Russian delegation pointed out that "denuclearization does not imply the renunciation of peaceful nuclear programs," while Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Alekseyev observed that the "right to develop atomic energy for peaceful purposes" belongs to every member of the NPT. Zhang Yan of the Chinese Foreign Ministry concurred. "If a country is signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and is monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, it must have the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes." South Korea's position, said Unification Minister Chung Dong-Young, "is that North Korea's demand for the right to

maintain a peaceful nuclear program should be allowed as its natural right.” If North Korea returned to the NPT and allowed inspections, then “it should have the right to pursue peaceful nuclear energy as a member of the treaty.” (17)

There was scant cause for optimism as the fourth round of talks reopened after a more than month-long hiatus. The two sides remained as far apart as ever and only two days before the Pentagon announced that it had drafted a revision to its doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons. The revision would allow field commanders to request presidential approval to use nuclear weapons against nations that had the potential to use nuclear, biological or chemical weapons or specifically for the purpose of eliminating such stockpiles. (18) It required little imagination to conclude that the DPRK was a leading potential target of the revised doctrine and the timing of the announcement only troubled the atmosphere at the talks. The waters were further muddied, no doubt intentionally, by Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf’s announcement in August that scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan had passed “centrifuges – parts and complete” to North Korea. But, he added, “I do not exactly remember the number.” Three weeks later, on the day before the fourth round of talks were scheduled to reopen, Musharraf suddenly recalled that Khan had passed “probably a dozen” centrifuges to the DPRK. (19) No evidence was provided and the matter was expected to be taken on trust, despite Khan’s denials of the statements that had earlier been attributed to him. Not only was there no way to ascertain the reliability of Musharraf’s story, but even a presumption of truth indicated nothing. A dozen centrifuges would be useless for enriching uranium to weapons grade since thousands of centrifuges are required for that process, as well as a steady and ample supply of electricity. The story was meaningless in every way except as an attempt to lend credence to the U.S. accusation that North Korea was conducting a secret uranium enrichment program.

As soon as the talks reopened the U.S. and DPRK delegations began haggling over the issue of nuclear power plants. The North Koreans were genuinely appreciative of South Korea’s generous offer to supply electricity via cross-border power lines, but they did not want to be at the whim of others. All it would take was a win by the conservative Grand National Party at South Korea’s next general election and the supply of electricity to the North could be cut off. It was imperative for the DPRK to be self-sufficient in energy. For that reason, the North Korean delegation argued that light water reactors should be an essential component in any agreement on denuclearization. The U.S. delegation was unsympathetic and found the concept of building light water reactors highly unpalatable. There was no middle ground and a North Korean spokesman characterized the issue as “the main obstacle of the talks,” adding that North Korea would shut down its graphite moderated reactors if it could count on receiving light water reactors as replacements. “We need what is real and concrete, not a vague right to peaceful use of nuclear energy that is high in the empty sky,” the DPRK spokesman explained. The U.S. delegation continued to insist that North Korea’s energy needs could be met through the transmission of electricity across power lines from the South. Nothing was said about whether the North could rely on an uninterrupted supply and it is probable that the Bush Administration was hoping that a change in administration in South Korea would result in a halt to the operation. (20)

The talks neared collapse. U.S. delegation head Christopher Hill declared the issue of light water reactors to be “simply unacceptable.” The South Koreans argued that some part of North Korea’s position would have to be accepted or there would be no agreement. “We very much understand the DPRK’s demand,” said South Korean delegation head Song Min-Soon. The North Korean delegation stated that the issue of light water reactors would need

to be resolved before agreement could be reached. A delegation spokesman indicated that the DPRK was willing to establish mutual trust and take U.S. concerns into consideration. "We can accept joint management and inspection after a new light water reactor is built." The U.S. position was hardening, though, and U.S. officials said that if North Korea continued to insist on retaining its right to nuclear power for civilian purposes, then talks would come to an end and there would be no point in ever meeting again. (21)

Had the talks fallen apart it could well have marked the end of the diplomatic road. Certainly senior U.S. officials were hinting as much, and the American delegation was talking about returning home. The Bush Administration would have interpreted a breakdown in negotiations as a signal that the time had come to implement non-diplomatic measures. It was a pivotal moment. The Chinese delegation knew it had to act quickly, and prepared a new draft statement that carefully balanced the opposing positions. The new document was presented on Friday, September 16, with the delegations being told that they had until the next afternoon to respond. The U.S. delegation immediately rejected the statement. But the Chinese held firm, telling the Americans, "This is the final draft. Take it or leave it." The deadline passed with no sign of movement from the U.S. delegation, so talks were extended into Sunday. Throughout the weekend, Christopher Hill was in frequent contact with Secretary of State Rice. The U.S. delegation made persistent but unsuccessful efforts to get the Chinese delegation to water down the proposed statement. The Chinese warned the U.S. delegation that if it failed to sign the draft statement, then they were prepared to blame the U.S. for the collapse of talks. "At one point they told us that we were totally isolated on this and that they would go to the press," acknowledged an Administration official. "China really dug in," said an official close to the talks. By Sunday night, Secretary of State Rice and President Bush relented and instructed the U.S. delegation to sign the document, but only on condition that each party could issue a statement offering its own interpretation. "We didn't want to lose the argument over this," explained a U.S. official. For the Bush Administration, the worst possible outcome would be for the talks to collapse with the U.S. being singled out for public blame. That would have made it impossible to garner international support for punitive measures against North Korea. Going it alone on North Korea would have been problematic, too. Washington had its hands full with ongoing efforts to win international backing for isolating and pressuring Iran for its pursuit of nuclear power plants. Furthermore, any hostile measures taken against North Korea carried an inherent risk of escalating into conflict, and the U.S. military was tied up in the occupation of Iraq. The Iraqi resistance was placing serious constraints on the ability of the U.S. to create new crises. For these reasons, intervention at this time in North Korea was simply unfeasible without allied support. Faced with these disagreeable choices, the Bush Administration apparently concluded that the best option was to in effect kick the ball down the field by agreeing to the document in hopes that a later time would bring a more advantageous set of circumstances. (22)

On Monday morning, all six nations at the talks signed the draft statement. The agreement committed the DPRK to abandon all nuclear weapons programs, rejoin the NPT and allow international inspections. The U.S. and DPRK pledged peaceful coexistence, respect for each other's sovereignty and to begin to normalize relations. South Korea reaffirmed its proposal to provide electrical power to the North. The issue of nuclear energy in North Korea was somewhat of a fudge, with the document noting only that North Korea "stated that it has the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy" while the other parties "expressed their respect and agreed to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light water reactors to the DPRK." (23)

Talks on implementation of the agreement were scheduled to begin in November. There was every reason to expect a long and contentious process, as a host of thorny issues remained unresolved. The U.S. hoped inspections would yield a bonanza of intelligence on the DPRK's military and industrial installations, and a senior administration official said the U.S. was planning a "very intrusive verification regime that will go well beyond what is required." Then there was the unresolved issue of timing, which could be expected to be the biggest stumbling block to an agreement. Immediately after the September six-party talks ended, a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman announced that his nation would disarm only after it had received new light water reactors. It was an exaggerated way of indicating to the U.S. that North Korea would not make all of the concessions without receiving anything in return. "They are telling us to give up everything," DPRK delegation head Kim Kye-Gwan said at the Beijing airport before departing for Pyongyang, "but there is nothing we should give up first." (24)

The Bush Administration still envisioned a process of unilateral disarmament by the DPRK. The U.S. wanted to make it clear that the light water reactor issue would not even be discussed, a State Department official said, until North Korea had completely disarmed and was declared weapons-free by international inspectors. Christopher Hill went further in his appearances before the House International Relations Committee and the Department of State Foreign Press Center. North Korea would not only have to disarm but also eliminate its program for peaceful nuclear energy. Even then, some unspecified period of time would have to pass before the U.S. would merely consider having a discussion on the subject of light water reactors. A discussion, it might be added, that was unlikely to lead to a concrete agreement. Nor was the U.S. inclined to honor the commitment it had signed in Beijing to begin to normalize relations. After returning to the U.S., Christopher Hill outlined U.S. plans before a closed-door session of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. It was not enough for North Korea to disarm and honor the terms of a negotiated agreement. The U.S. would not entertain the possibility of normalizing relations unless the DPRK also agreed to address human rights issues, biochemical weapons stocks, support for terrorism and "other illegitimate" activities. These concerns could only serve as convenient excuses for the U.S. to avoid normalization of relations. The DPRK abandoned terrorist actions long ago with the advent of democracy in South Korea and wild accusations of drug dealing and counterfeiting as official state policy remain unsubstantiated. Similarly, it is mere conjecture that North Korea has an arsenal of biochemical weapons. By raising such matters Hill made it clear that the U.S. was not prepared to normalize relations with the DPRK regardless of what it offered in return. The recently signed document had done nothing to banish thoughts of crushing North Korea. Hill warned his audience that if North Korea were found to be engaging in the proliferation of nuclear weapons or technologies, then the U.S. would be "forced" to take "concrete measures," which could include not only economic sanctions but also military action. (25) The Bush Administration had already shown that it was not above concocting such evidence, as it had done earlier when it issued a deliberately falsified report claiming that North Korea had supplied uranium hexafluoride to Libya. There was something unsettling in the arrogance of U.S. leaders in threatening and bullying the small and impoverished nation of North Korea. Israel, India and Pakistan were all non-signatories to the NPT and had developed sizable arsenals of nuclear weapons and missiles. The U.S. found nothing amiss in that state of affairs. Only North Korea was singled out for pressure and threats of punishment, despite the fact that it was the only one of the four nations that had announced nuclear disarmament as its goal. All North Korea asked in return was not to be threatened and to have the U.S. in essence honor the spirit of the principles it had signed in the 1994 Agreed Framework. This is to say nothing of the absurdity of the most heavily

armed and aggressive nation in the world raising an alarm over a small nation struggling for survival.

The outlook for a final negotiated settlement does not appear encouraging, given the continued intransigence of the Bush Administration. Yet the U.S. is no longer in a position to call all the shots. The nations of the region have too much to lose from a confrontation on the Korean Peninsula and are increasingly willing to risk incurring Washington's wrath for the sake of peace. The U.S. had indeed found itself isolated at the six-party talks, backed only by Japan with the other parties openly supportive of Pyongyang's position. Shortly after the conclusion of the September talks, Aleksandar Rumyantsev, head of Russia's Atomic Energy Agency, announced that his nation was ready and willing to join a project to build nuclear power plants in the DPRK. South Korea expressed a willingness to provide additional assistance and to expand economic cooperation with the North, a position that an annoyed Christopher Hill thought undermined the U.S. position. And so it had. South Korea, like China and Russia, wanted a peaceful and equitable settlement, not confrontation and threats. (26)

On a surface level, the statement of principles signed at the September talks appeared to accomplish nothing more than committing the parties to further dialogue. At the same time, it also marked a crucial turning point in relations in Northeast Asia. Restive over Washington's approach, the other parties at the talks boldly offered their own vision of the future for Northeast Asia. There may be little hope for a negotiated settlement in the remaining years of the Bush Administration. But South Korea, China and Russia feel they can at least compel the U.S. to make some concessions and refrain from confrontation with North Korea. The Iraqi resistance deserves a great deal of credit for tying Washington's hands, but it is China, Russia and above all South Korea that have played the major role in circumventing U.S. plans to plunge the Korean Peninsula into crisis or possibly war. It is to be hoped that this resistance to the Bush Administration's designs is a signpost on the road to the future. The day must come when the nations of the world no longer allow themselves to be bullied into silence as the U.S. targets yet another helpless state for destruction and domination. Much depends on the progress of ongoing talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, but the September six-party talks marked a victory in the international struggle for sovereignty and peace.

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