

It is widely acknowledged today that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is continuing to use its "nuclear card" successfully in the complicated diplomatic dialogue with the United States.

The signing of the Agreed Framework in October 1994 in Geneva, the Kuala Lumpur agreements in June 1995, and finally the agreement signed in New York in December 1995 between the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and North Korea on the provision of light water reactors (LWRs) were all the result of difficult American-North Korean compromises. But there is a "plus" sign on the side of Pyongyang.

However governments or political circles within the international community might evaluate the results of the negotiations between the United States and North Korea, one has to admit that they present a unique case where priority in the dispute was not given to the responsible international organization—in this case the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Instead, the compromise was achieved through bilateral agreements. According to international nonproliferation standards, the compromise was not without its flaws, but a positive balance on the nuclear issue has been achieved in the Agreed Framework. As for its negative aspect—the fact that the inspection of the DPRK's nuclear facilities has been postponed until the year 2000—this can be "worked out" in the subsequent stages of the document's implementation. That is why the process of implementing the U.S.-North Korean agreement—with its "compromise" nature and its different interpretations—will be difficult, complicated, and full of obstacles. This viewpoint examines the U.S.-DPRK agreements from an outsider's perspective, but one which has been informed by a long experience in dealing with North Korean officials.

PYONGYANG IS FORCED TO CHANGE ITS STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Over the past 50 years, the leadership of North Korea, in the person of Kim Il-sung, rather successfully

demonstrated the ability to "sit on two chairs": one Soviet and one Chinese. It also showed a talent for maneuvering between them, which enabled North Korea to receive support and aid from both allies. When

the relationship between the Soviet Union and North Korea became strained (1960 to 1970), Kim Il-sung skillfully used even this occasion to his advantage. Clearly, this situation could not last forever. Pyongyang also realized this, and showed increasing concerns over the fact that the Soviet Union and

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South Korea would sooner or later attempt to normalize their relations. The North Korean leadership also recognized its vulnerability regarding the economic challenge presented by South Korea, where Pyongyang was losing the competition and its position was weakening every year. Under these circumstances, the DPRK leadership made a decision in the 1970s to pursue its own nuclear program, in case the situation should develop unfavorably for North Korea.

At the same time, the DPRK's diplomats undertook an active political initiative to solicit support from the international community for its program of peaceful unification and creation of the so-called Democratic Confederative Republic of Korea (DCRK). North Korea also wanted to prevent the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Soviet Union and entrance of one or both Korean states into the United Nations. The DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs pursued this three-fold diplomatic thrust determinedly in its contacts with representatives from the Soviet Union and South Korea. During several meetings between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs

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of the Soviet Union and the DPRK in the 1980s, the Soviet side had repeatedly stated its support for the North Korean version of the unification of Korea in the creation of a DCRK. Soviet representatives spoke out against “unfounded attempts to create a ‘two-Korea’ situation by ‘mutual recognition’ of North and South, as well as their separate or simultaneous admission to the U.N.”¹

From the Chinese side, assurances of support for the peaceful unification of Korea also followed. The Chinese never failed to underline the necessity for the “relaxation of tension on the Korean peninsula,” stressing that both Koreas should participate in this process. The ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that continuation of practical contacts with South Korea “is a contribution to the lessening of tension on the peninsula and promotion of peaceful unification of Korea.”²

The DPRK leadership continued to voice its increasing concerns about the growing cooperation between the Soviet Union and South Korea, first in the trade and economic spheres, and later in the political realm. The ideological foundation for relations between North Korea and its allies was becoming less and less defined. Calls to Moscow and Beijing to preserve their “class-based” approach towards the South Korean regime were no longer effective. Mikhail Gorbachev expressed his support for the development of economic cooperation with the ROK “in the context of overall normalization of the situation on the Korean peninsula.”³ The visit by Soviet Foreign Affairs Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to Beijing in early September 1990 finally convinced the North Korean leadership that it was impossible to stop the process of normalization of relations between the Soviet Union and the Republic of Korea. North Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim En Nam made the undiplomatic remark that such actions on the part of the Soviet Union “force Pyongyang to take necessary measures to build certain types of weapons by our own means.”⁴ Political observers regarded this statement as a hint that North Korea was actively developing nuclear weapons. From this moment on, one can argue that Pyongyang had begun to re-evaluate its foreign policy strategy, placing its bet on the “nuclear card,” which, above all, required the realization of its plans to enter into a dialogue with the United States to resolve a whole range of bilateral problems, including the normalization of relations.

By the end of the 1980s, the North Korean nuclear problem had led to significant complications in the po-

litical situation on the Korean peninsula, and the United States had become actively involved in attempting to settle these problems. Pyongyang and Washington had begun confidential diplomatic contacts in Beijing on the level of advisors to the embassies. Similar contacts took place in Panmunjom between military representatives of the two states. Thus, in its external policies Pyongyang emphasized direct dialogue with the United States, with the “nuclear card” acting as North Korea’s “bait” for Washington.

While North Korea continued to preserve its connections with China in case an “emergency” situation might arise, it had also initiated focused diplomatic efforts. North Korea’s ultimate goals were the complete normalization of relations with the United States and a parallel settlement of the nuclear problem on terms favorable to itself. Through this complicated political struggle, Pyongyang also hopes for an improvement in relations with Japan and other Western countries.

The current policy of the North Korean leadership is to see that Russia does not adopt an independent role in the settlement of the nuclear question. Pyongyang would rather see Moscow as the “coauthor” for North Korea’s policy. In other words, North Korea would prefer that Moscow fully support its course of action in the dialogue with the United States. In Pyongyang’s thinking, this would strengthen its position vis-a-vis the United States. As for South Korea, Pyongyang wants to eliminate Seoul from the process of negotiations altogether.

U.S.-DPRK DIALOGUE: FIRST RESULTS BRING HOPE

The critical point in the North Korean nuclear problem came on March 12, 1993, when the DPRK government issued a statement in which it declared its intention to withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (of which it been a member since December 1985). It indicated that this dispute could be decided only through direct negotiations with the United States.⁵

The U.S. administration, however, in spite of such an extreme step by the North Korean government, continued contacts with Pyongyang. The result of these negotiations became the Joint Statement, signed in June 1993 in New York. A close analysis of the U.S.-North Korean document reveals that in exchange for a temporary delay of its withdrawal from the NPT, Pyongyang had received a number of very important obligations

from the United States. The United States agreed to refrain from the threat or use of force, to respect the DPRK's sovereignty, and not to intervene in its internal affairs. The DPRK, in its turn, declared that it would temporarily postpone its withdrawal from the NPT.⁶ In other words, North Korea achieved more than its American partners, even though both sides understood that the procedural basis for the signed document did not meet normal international standards (and besides, that the two sides did not have diplomatic relations). However, for North Korean diplomacy it represented a hopeful step forward that it planned to develop further during the following negotiations with the United States.

Nevertheless, disagreements over the U.S.-South Korean "Team Spirit" training exercises and inspections of DPRK nuclear facilities soon emerged. North Korean representatives insisted that all problems should be solved only with the participation of the United States. After intensive negotiations, the two sides managed to overcome their serious disagreements. On February 25, 1994, the United States and North Korea formed a "pact" in which the United States canceled its "Team Spirit" maneuvers with South Korea in return for North Korea's acceptance of IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities and agreement to hold negotiations with the South on preparation for an exchange of special memoranda from the presidents of DPRK and the ROK. Finally, the two sides agreed to hold a third round of talks in Geneva on March 24, 1994.⁷ The North-South talks did not take place, however, due to the death of Kim Il-sung that summer.

The next crisis came on June 13, 1994, when the DPRK declared its withdrawal from the IAEA over the Agency's cessation of technical assistance to a series of North Korean projects (after the DPRK had refused to allow IAEA inspectors access to its nuclear facilities). The visit by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter to Pyongyang and Seoul, during which an agreement was reached to hold another round of U.S.-DPRK negotiations, managed to alleviate the crisis. The positive role of Russia and its proposal for an International Conference on Security and Nuclear Status of the Korean Peninsula should be emphasized here. Along with the efforts of the U.N. Security Council and the IAEA, Russia stimulated the United States and North Korea to renew their dialogue. However, neither the United States nor the DPRK was willing to give priority to any other party, not even to an international forum, in solving this complicated problem. By that time, Washington

and Pyongyang had already developed a history of cooperation and wanted to achieve new compromises without any outside help.

In August 1994, the United States and DPRK signed another document in Geneva. North Korea declared its readiness to exchange its gas-graphite reactors for LWRs and abandon construction of two new gas-graphite reactors and a reprocessing facility, provided that the United States supplied the LWRs and guaranteed to compensate the DPRK for its energy losses. The United States and North Korea agreed to exchange diplomatic representatives (establish liaison offices). For its part, Pyongyang stated that it would remain a member of the NPT. The new document, as well as the previous one (signed in June 1993), added more substance to the U.S.-North Korean agreements and significantly advanced the bilateral dialogue. The document was in Pyongyang's interest, as well as in Washington's. It was important for North Korea to pull the United States deeper into the agreement and to "hang" more obligations on it than it was taking upon itself. North Korea did not accept any other obligations besides the promise to remain in the NPT. (Even though North Korea expressed its readiness to begin consultations with the IAEA on the question of guarantees and open negotiations with South Korea, these "obligations" did not worry North Korea, because it did not consider them an influential factor in the negotiations.)

These struggles and compromises finally resulted in the signing of the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994, in Geneva. The main points of this agreement are well-known, but include the following key items: 1) the provision to the DPRK of two LWRs financed by an international consortium; 2) compensation to the DPRK for its losses due to the freezing of its gas-graphite reactors by the supply of 500,000 tons of oil a year (until the first LWR is brought on line); 3) the DPRK's freezing of its gas-graphite reactors and their eventual dismantlement (after the LWRs are constructed); 4) joint moves towards complete normalization of political and economic relations; 5) U.S. official guarantees on the non-use of nuclear weapons against the DPRK, in return for Pyongyang's efforts to realize the "Joint Declaration of North and South on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" with Seoul; 6) the DPRK's continued membership in the NPT and its acceptance of IAEA routine and special inspections of those nuclear facilities that are not being shut-down (after the delivery of the LWRs).⁸

The U.S.-DPRK agreements regarding the supply of U.S. alternative fuel and cancellation of limitations on trade and financial operations with DPRK have been realized. U.S. President Bill Clinton sent to Kim Jong-il, the leader of DPRK, a message that officially confirmed the U.S. intention to assist realization of the agreements on financing and construction of the LWRs in the DPRK. Several shipments of oil have been made to the DPRK.

North Korea also has taken several measures to implement the Agreed Framework. Its five megawatt reactor was shut down and the spent fuel was unloaded and stored in a containment facility. Pyongyang also began to restore trade relations with Washington and allowed American merchant ships into its ports. Contacts for normalization of bilateral relations have been established.

A close analysis of the signed document reveals that its major contribution is the DPRK's obligation to remain a member of the NPT and fulfill its inspection agreement with the IAEA. However, several points of the document pose some concern because they could become obstacles from the point of view of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. First, the DPRK's commitment to submit to IAEA inspections of its nuclear activities is voluntary and depends on whether the United States fulfills its obligations. This is a departure from the IAEA norms, which are unconditional. Second, a precedent has been created for other countries to bargain for a special status within the NPT. (When asked to fulfill particular obligations, Pyongyang more than once claimed that it had a special status within the NPT.) Third, concerns have emerged over how the U.S.-North Korean agreement is going to reflect on the IAEA system overall. So far, there are no answers to these questions. During the next few years we are going to see whether by signing the Agreed Framework with DPRK the United States acted wisely and correctly when it agreed to such serious compromises of the international nonproliferation regime.

Further contacts between the United States and North Korea led to important new agreements in Kuala Lumpur (June 1995), when the two sides agreed on the type of the LWRs. DPRK made a very serious compromise when it agreed that South Korea would supply the reactors. When this agreement was officially signed between DPRK and KEDO in December 1995, a final stage in the U.S.-North Korean dialogue was reached.

The overall result of this dialogue can be evaluated

as positive, not only from the point of view of the settlement of the North Korean nuclear problem, but also in its general normalization of the situation on the Korean peninsula and its environs. Through some significant compromises, the United States managed to keep the DPRK in the NPT regime and stop its dangerous nuclear activity. In return, North Korea received guarantees that the United States will assist conversion of the DPRK's nuclear program, and, in the future, normalize diplomatic relations. However, practical realization of the Agreed Framework and the construction of the LWR will not be an easy process, considering the fact that these documents are a product of difficult compromises, as well as different interpretations of the documents' main provisions.

THE NORTH KOREAN GAME WITH THE UNITED STATES AND THE ROLE OF RUSSIA

As noted above, the Pyongyang leadership has tried to solve the North Korean nuclear problem by placing all bets on the American card. Naturally, North Korea would have liked Russia to remain Pyongyang's "reliable backer" in its complicated negotiations with Washington. However, in spite of the general leftist mood of the Russian public, today Russia cannot provide the DPRK with any substantial political or, more importantly, economic support.

In principle, Moscow is ready to renew cooperation with Pyongyang in the sphere of civilian use of nuclear energy. In other words, it would be willing to resume its 1985 agreement to construct a nuclear plant in the DPRK, provided, of course, that North Korea remains a member of the NPT and strictly fulfills its obligations and IAEA safeguards agreement. However, the lack of resources in Russia and the DPRK does not allow the two countries to go forward with such plans.

As is well-known, Pyongyang insisted at the very beginning that the LWRs be supplied from Russia rather than South Korea. Russian technology is quite familiar to scientists in the DPRK, many of whom know the Russian language well (having received secondary and higher education in the Soviet Union). In addition, during the years of friendly relations, North Koreans have gotten to know the Russian character well and appreciate Russian friendliness towards Koreans. That is why the DPRK insisted so strongly on Russian reactors and wanted KEDO or other countries to pay for the supply of Russian reactors.

Moscow was also willing to supply its indigenous

reactors to the DPRK under these conditions. The United States, South Korea, and Japan protested, however, even though KEDO welcomed Russian participation in the consortium. The eventual conditions under which Russia has been offered a part in this large international project (storage and reprocessing of the environmentally harmful North Korean spent fuel and shipping oil to compensate the DPRK for its energy losses) do not offer Moscow a serious enough role. It is well-known that Russia has done a great deal to help the DPRK to develop its research in the sphere of the civilian use of nuclear energy. In the 1960s, Russia built an experimental nuclear reactor in Yongbyong (which is under IAEA safeguards). Pyongyang joined the NPT in 1985 mainly due to considerable diplomatic efforts by Russia. When realization of the 1985 reactor agreement began, Russian specialists made significant progress in choosing an appropriate site for its construction at Sinpo. Moscow's desire to secure for itself an important part in the KEDO project is justified considering its contribution to the development of North Korean nuclear program.

Overall, the Russian reaction to the U.S.-North Korean agreements in the nuclear sphere has been positive. Russia's position, however, stems from the view that all of Pyongyang's nuclear activity should be under the control of the IAEA and that the Agency's functions should be strengthened. No one should try to undermine the IAEA's authority in the sphere of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Russia's interest in the stabilization of the situation on the Korean peninsula cannot be underestimated. Russia's strategic course requires continuation of good relations with the DPRK, based upon commonly acknowledged international norms (noninterference into internal affairs, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the right to choose the path of social and economic development, guarantees of the main human rights to its citizens, etc.). That is why Moscow offered to replace its 1961 "Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance" with a new agreement of a more general, political nature. Relations between Moscow and South Korea are being strengthened on the basis of a more constructive partnership. Moscow's diplomatic course on the Korean peninsula is not only in the national interest of the Russian government, but also contributes to the stabilization of the general situation in this region, creating the preconditions for developing an inter-Korean dialogue. Even

though it is still premature to speak about an improvement in relations between Pyongyang and Seoul, Russian efforts along with the contribution of the U.S.-North Korean dialogue are positive influences on the whole range of Korean issues, including, first and foremost, the nuclear dimension.

THE TRUE GOALS OF PYONGYANG IN ITS DIALOGUE WITH WASHINGTON

A logical question arises: what realistic goals are Pyongyang pursuing in its dialogue with Washington? I believe, there are several. First, the North Korean leadership is seeking to use its "nuclear card" so that the United States will help it update its nuclear program and construct new LWRs. The DPRK simply does not have any other way to receive a \$4.5 billion "gift." Besides the nuclear issue, Pyongyang could not provide any other serious motivation to the United States for establishing contact with the DPRK (even though currently North Koreans are trying to revive the idea of signing a peace agreement with the United States instead of a truce). Second, Washington's consent to begin a negotiating process to solve the North Korean nuclear problem is perceived by the DPRK as a signal that the United States is willing to include North Korea in its sphere of interest. Pyongyang would like to use this development to normalize political relations. Of course, the North Korean leadership realizes that this is going to be a slow process, considering the anti-Pyongyang mood of the American public, as well as South Korea's sharply negative attitude towards the DPRK's plans. Third, Pyongyang would like if not to "measure up" to Seoul in its relations with the United States, then at least to become a target of U.S. attention and support (much the same way that Israel and Egypt are). Naturally, at some future stage, North Korea wants to receive U.S. assistance in the reconstruction of the DPRK's civilian economy.

While pursuing the goal of improving relations with Washington, the DPRK will also use other cards in its vicinity, such as the Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. Signs of DPRK throwing them into the game can already be seen. It is being done Asian style—subtly and unobtrusively. During contacts with American representatives, DPRK officials are floating the idea of "recognizing" that U.S. troops in Korea "support the balance of power in Eastern Asia." Publicly, however, North Korea continues to criticize the presence

of U.S. forces in South Korea and demands their withdrawal from the peninsula. At the same time, during confidential conversations with Americans, North Koreans hint that in case the United States does withdraw, Korea will be left “facing a threat from China, Russia, and Japan.” That is why Pyongyang concludes that the U.S. presence on the peninsula is “useful.”¹⁰

Fourth, normalization of contacts with the United States gives Pyongyang an opportunity to improve its relations with the rest of the Western world. With this improvement, North Korea is counting on the flow of foreign investment into its newly-created economic zones.

At the same time, the DPRK leadership realizes that the course of developing relations with the United States conceals the danger of “opening” North Korean society to Western influence, a goal that has been sought in Washington, Seoul, and other capitals. Therefore, Kim Jong-il’s regime will strictly control the process of redirecting North Korea’s nuclear program, the construction of the LWRs, and the parallel normalization of relations with the United States, Japan, and other Western countries. The North Korean leadership will try to minimize the possible “side effects” on the country’s internal political situation and not allow its population to have widespread contacts with representatives from the “other” world.

To conclude, it is important to stress that the process of converting the North Korean nuclear program and normalizing U.S.-DPRK relations will be contradictory and slow, with compromises, deep disagreements, and even confrontations. However, overall North Korean policy will be directed at achieving solutions and smoothing over conflicts because Pyongyang sees the normalization of relations with the United States as a guarantee for the survival of its regime and the strengthening of its position, not only on the Korean peninsula, but in the world.

⁵ Announcement of the Government of the Korean Democratic People’s Republic, *CTAK Information Bulletin*, No. 60, March 13, 1993, p. 8.

⁶ Joint Statement of the DPRK and the USA, *Hodon Sinmun* (Pyongyang), June 14, 1993, p. 2.

⁷ Valery Denisov, “Nuclear Security of the Korean Peninsula Demands Several Dialogues,” *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn’*, No. 5, 1994, p. 29.

⁸ Valery Denisov, “North Korean-U.S.: A compromise in the interests of nuclear nonproliferation,” *Rossiyskiy Diplomaticheskii Kur’er*, No. 10, 1994.

⁹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 21, 1995, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹ “On the Visit of the DPRK Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim En Nam to the Soviet Union,” *Pravda*, May 7, 1988, p. 3; “Joint Soviet-Korean Communique,” *Pravda*, January 24, 1986, p. 4.

² A.V. Torkunov, E.P. Ufimtsev, *The Korean Problem: A New Perspective* (Moscow: “Ankil” Publishing House, 1995), p. 59.

³ Speech by M. S. Gorbachev in Krasnoyarsk, *Pravda*, September 18, 1988, p. 4.

⁴ “Diplomatic relations: a case of selling out for dollars,” *Minchy Choson* (Pyongyang), September 5, 1990, p. 2.