



Enabling disablement: some assembly required

by James Schoff

As we mark the one-year anniversary of North Korea's Oct. 9, 2006 nuclear test, there are dramatic agreements from the Korean Peninsula that offer real hope for near-term progress toward the goals of denuclearization and national reconciliation. Like a wrapped gift, however, we can't see the contents and understand the true nature of these so-called achievements. Contrary to South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's confident statement that "the North Korean nuclear issue will rapidly arrive at a complete resolution," we are better off keeping expectations in check because upon opening this gift we are likely to find that more assembly is required.

Though overshadowed somewhat by the North-South Korean summit in Pyongyang, the key agreement from a U.S. perspective stems from the Six-Party Talks and outlines "second-phase" actions for implementation of the joint statement regarding North Korean denuclearization put forth in 2005. Briefly summarized, North Korea agreed to disable its most important nuclear facilities and to provide a complete declaration of all its nuclear programs by the end of this year. In return, the U.S. committed to begin a process of removing the designation of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism and lifting other economic sanctions, as well as working with other six-party members to provide Pyongyang with significant economic, energy, and humanitarian assistance.

The problem is that we don't know what "disablement" means. The agreement says that specific disablement measures will be recommended by the nuclear expert working group, and to the negotiators' credit this group has enjoyed unprecedented access to North Korean facilities in preparation for making its recommendations. But does a written description of these disablement procedures exist (in English and in other languages), and has it been formally approved by the six-party negotiators? How specific are these instructions? In the absence of more information, we can only assume that there is less here than meets the eye.

U.S. officials have suggested that disablement of facilities would be substantial enough to require at least a year of North Korean effort to reconstitute their plutonium production and reprocessing functions. But a length of time for reconstitution does not tell us anything about how much effort and investment would be required to reverse this loss of capacity. Depending on how disablement is carried out, 12 months could simply be the lead time for procuring a small number of critical parts that have been removed and destroyed, which might be difficult to detect; conversely, it could force Pyongyang to undertake an expensive and very visible year-long effort to rebuild its nuclear capabilities. That's a big difference.

In theory, I support lifting sanctions vis-à-vis North Korea in return for significant disablement and a full declaration of its nuclear programs. In this "action-for-action" format of the Six-Party Talks, such an exchange would be an attractive deal for the United States, and Washington would retain many incentive "actions" (such as the lifting of UN sanctions, economic and energy development assistance, a peace treaty, or full normalization) to trade for later North Korean abandonment of fissile material (including nuclear weapons) and other desired confidence building measures related to ongoing nuclear transparency, halting missile development, or illicit trafficking. There is no need for "the perfect to be the enemy of the good" in this exchange.

But is the yearend deadline for disablement worries me most. By many accounts, "significant disablement" involves actions that could take up to one year to complete in some cases (such as flushing residual radioactive liquids out of the piping network in a reprocessing facility). Removing irradiated fuel from the Yongbyon reactor is one likely disablement step that could be completed within a few months, but this only makes sense if there is an agreed upon long-term storage solution. Moreover, the track record for meeting technical deadlines at Yongbyon's dilapidated facilities, such as the fuel canning process in the 1990s, is not encouraging. Local infrastructure improvements might also be needed, as the Yongbyon area is not equipped to host larger numbers of international workers and inspectors for this kind of project.

In addition, the fact that North Korea tested a nuclear weapon means that there are weapons' production or assembly facilities yet to be identified. The forthcoming declaration should address this issue, and North Korea should understand that these will need to be disabled too. Does North Korea recognize that there will likely be a second round of disablement (i.e., following disablement that takes place before year's end, other work will continue until we reach an agreed state of deconstruction)? This should not require a separate "action" on Washington's part.

The understandable desire to move quickly (if only to help sustain momentum in the process and political support from Washington) creates a dangerous risk: raising expectations beyond an appropriate level or creating misunderstandings amongst the six-parties regarding what has been agreed upon (or both). I am skeptical that a little over two months of disablement work will yield sufficient results to warrant U.S. concessions on economic sanctions, but that does not mean that it can not be a meaningful down payment toward that end. Slipping past the yearend deadline should not be seen as failure – if it happens – as long as we achieve greater clarity regarding the value of this sanctions-for-disablement transaction.

Moreover, we should take some time to organize ourselves for success in this endeavor. Nuclear disablement requires proper planning, documentation, and good communication and coordination among different agencies within the U.S. government, as well as between the other governments (and the IAEA) involved. To start, we need a clearly designated U.S. project manager for this effort with appropriate experience. Done correctly, we are keeping team members consistent, learning more about the history of North Korea's programs to corroborate its declaration, and investing in measures that will facilitate later dismantlement (including infrastructure investments and redirecting North Korean scientists to focus on environmentally sound methods of waste disposal and related projects).

This last point is important, since North Korea's most revered scientists will not want to preside over the destruction of programs to which they have dedicated their careers. We should instead encourage them to work for the preservation of Korea's environment, rather than sell their services to Iran or other interested buyers.

A tangible start to nuclear disablement in North Korea is about the best anniversary gift one could have hoped for a year ago. The chief U.S. negotiator, Ambassador Chris Hill, his team, and their six-party colleagues deserve credit for advancing this far the denuclearization-normalization process, but there is more work to be done. We should not be surprised if, come Christmas, it becomes clear that this gift requires more assembly. Let's get out our tool box now and be prepared to fulfill the promises made in Beijing.

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