

Faith-Based Nonproliferation

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So after a couple of decades of broken promises, missile launches and nuclear tests, North Korea's Kim Jong Il has finally decided to give up his nuclear ambitions in return for diplomatic recognition and foreign aid. The Bush Administration will no doubt be praised with scorn for finally being "reasonable" and recognizing "reality," but the exercise strikes us as something close to faith-based nonproliferation.

Perhaps the best thing we can say about the deal is that it is marginally better than the "Agreed Framework," the 1994 accord in which the Clinton Administration agreed to hand over two light-water reactors and 500,000 tons of fuel oil a year in exchange for North Korea's promise to freeze its plutonium program. Pyongyang pocketed the oil, only to demand more compensation within a few years while secretly enriching uranium in a separate nuclear program that it only acknowledged in 2002.

This time there are no nuclear reactors on offer, and North Korea will get only 5% of the promised one million tons of fuel oil and humanitarian assistance up front. The remaining 95% is contingent upon North Korea providing a full accounting of all of its nuclear programs within 60 days, and ultimately agreeing to dismantle the works. That includes nuclear bombs, spent fuel and the clandestine uranium program -- which it now denies having but that the Bush Administration insists does exist.

The other difference from 1994 is that China is a party to this accord. Beijing has by far the most leverage of any country on Pyongyang, as its political patron and supplier of most of its energy needs. China was instrumental in getting Pyongyang back to the negotiating table after a three-year absence, and the U.S. is counting on it to help ensure the North's cooperation.

A senior Administration official tells us that there has been a "sea change" in the Chinese attitude toward North Korea since last summer's missile launch -- read: Beijing is furious -- and that Beijing is now "heavily invested" in making sure that the deal succeeds. We can only hope this is so.

However, Kim has proven he can stand up to China before, and the dictator's habit is to strike an agreement and then try to renegotiate it along the way for better terms. He will have many chances to do so under yesterday's accord, because the commitments and timetables are vague to say the least. His one important specific promise is to shut down his plutonium facility, at Yongbyon, within 60 days.

The accord makes no mention of the plutonium his regime has produced, nor of the eight or more nuclear bombs he is thought to possess. Nor does it refer to his uranium

enrichment program, much less specify that international inspectors will be able to roam the country's vast network of underground installations for evidence of where that program might be. Bush Administration officials say that they believe that all of Kim's nuclear activities are covered under the agreement, and that Kim will be expected to come clean in his 60-day declaration.

But if he doesn't? One danger of this accord is that it will start a traditional "arms control" process in which Kim can stall and protest, and the U.S. will be pressured to make even further concessions. We can already see the lineup of South Koreans, Chinese, American media and State Department officials all suggesting that the Bush Administration is being obstinate and "unrealistic" if it insists on intrusive inspections, or on recovering all of Kim's plutonium.

Meanwhile, the immediate effect of the fuel assistance and promises of diplomatic recognition will sustain Kim's regime, allowing him to sell the deal at home as a victory for his missile and nuclear blackmail. The timing is especially ironic given that Kim's position arguably has never been more precarious thanks to U.S.-imposed financial measures against the North's international banking activities.

Treasury's blacklisting of Banco Delta Asia in Macau in September 2005 -- and the demonstration effect on other banks that did business with the North -- essentially shut down Pyongyang's access to the global banking system. The U.S. is now promising to review its Banco Delta Asia action within 30 days. If that results in the government of Macau releasing some portion of the \$24 million in BNA's North Korean accounts, it's yet another prop for the regime.

All of which is to say that this is far from the nonproliferation model set by Libya's Moammar Gadhafi in the wake of Saddam Hussein's ouster in 2003. Gadhafi relinquished his entire nuclear program up front, and only later -- once compliance was verified and the nuclear materials removed from the country -- did the U.S. take Libya off the terror list and provide other rewards.

Perhaps Mr. Bush feels this is the best he can do in the waning days of his Administration. Or perhaps, in the most favorable interpretation, he wants to clear the decks of this issue in order to have more political capital to control Iran's nuclear ambitions. Iran may look at this deal, however, and conclude it has little to lose by raising the nuclear stakes. We'd like to believe this will turn out better, but history doesn't support such faith.