

Nuclear Deal With North Korea Back on Track After Sub Incident

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IMPLEMENTATION of the 1994 U.S. North Korean agreed framework resumed in January following Pyongyang's December 29 expression of regret over the grounding of one of its reconnaissance submarines on the South Korean coast. On January 8, the "canning" of spent fuel at North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility resumed after having stopped in November. That same day, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and North Korea signed two protocols in New York that will allow KEDO to begin site preparation work on the \$5 billion light water reactor (LWR) project, the central component of the agreed framework.

KEDO is the international consortium founded by the United States, Japan and South Korea to implement the 1994 denuclearization accord. The agreement requires North Korea to freeze and eventually eliminate its nuclear weapons program in exchange for the construction of two proliferation resistant 1,000 megawatt (electric) LWRs and the delivery of heavy fuel oil while the reactors are being built.

Canning' Resumes

The canning operation, which entails transferring the spent fuel rods from a cooling pond where they are currently stored into steel containers suitable for transshipment, was suspended in early November after North Korean workers failed to return from a scheduled work stoppage. At that point, more than half of the Yongbyon reactor's 8,000 spent fuel elements had been placed in "dry storage" by the U.S. Department of Energy and its private contractor.

North Korea removed the spent fuel from its 5 megawatt (electric) experimental reactor at Yongbyon in 1994. The fuel remains a serious proliferation hazard because it contains enough plutonium to build several nuclear bombs. As part of the 1994 deal, North Korea shut down the Yongbyon reactor, with the promise to dismantle it and send its spent fuel out of the country without being reprocessed. U.S. officials hope to complete the canning operation by the end of 1997.

With the submarine incident resolved, KEDO has resumed activity on a number of fronts, according to KEDO spokesman Jason Shaplen. The two protocols signed January 8 by KEDO and Pyongyang represent an important milestone in the LWR project's development, clearing the way for KEDO to begin site preparation near Sinpo in North Korea. Arrangements for KEDO to contract for services in North Korea and KEDO's access to the proposed construction site are covered in the agreements.

KEDO's seventh site survey team is preparing to visit North Korea to conduct a detailed geological investigation and some additional preliminary site preparation work. South Korea indefinitely postponed a planned October trip by the mostly South Korean team of engineers due to concerns over their safety while working in North Korea. The submarine incident delayed the site preparation, but the effect on the overall LWR project schedule is uncertain. The 1995 KEDO North Korean supply agreement calls for completion of the first reactor by 2003 on a "best efforts" basis, and KEDO hopes

to be able to make up some of the lost time.

In addition to sending the first shipment of heavy fuel oil for the current year supply schedule, which began on October 31, 1996, KEDO has reached an agreement in principle on accession to KEDO by EURATOM, the nuclear regulatory body of the European Union (EU). The EU is expected to make "an immediate contribution of \$13 million and an annual contribution of \$20 million in the future" according to Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord. The EU contribution would nearly equal the annual level of U.S. financial support (\$22 million for 1996), and would pay for approximately one third of the annual \$60 million cost of fuel deliveries to North Korea.

KEDO and Pyongyang have not yet begun to negotiate a protocol on penalties if either party fails to meet its obligations as called for in the supply agreement. Shaplen said talks on the non payment protocol will begin as soon as is practicable.

The Submarine Incident

The resumption of activity implementing the framework accord as of January 31, 1997, came after three and a half months of escalating tension, carefully phrased threats, and intensive U.S. diplomatic efforts. On September 18, the North Korean sub was discovered grounded 100 yards off the South Korean coast.

South Korean President Kim Young Sam called the incident a provocation and demanded a sincere apology from the North. On October 9, South Korea suspended the signing of two KEDO North Korean protocols and a trip by KEDO's site survey team to the North.

Lord flew to Seoul the next day to mend U.S. South Korean relations damaged by Secretary of State Warren Christopher's initial call for restraint from "all parties." After meeting with South Korean leaders, Lord confirmed Washington's and Seoul's support for the agreed framework, but added that there would be "a pause in the pace of our activities."

In response, North Korea warned on October 15 that another delay in work on the reactors might prompt the North to reconsider its nuclear freeze. North Korean preparations to test an intermediate range ballistic missile were reported by the Japanese press the next day. The cancellation of the missile test was announced by the State Department on November 8, after several meetings in New York between U.S. and North Korean diplomats.

U.S. South Korean Disagreement

On November 9, South Korean President Kim reiterated his demand for a "sincere apology" in an interview with The Washington Post. At the time, U.S. officials asked the North to make "an acceptable gesture." Subsequently, the United States and South Korea settled their differences at the November 24 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila. In the reportedly heated exchange, President Clinton prevailed on President Kim to support American diplomatic efforts to negotiate a resolution of the crisis. The final negotiations went on through December between U.S. and North Korean diplomats in New York.

The result was a North Korean Foreign Ministry statement read over the radio on December 29 that recognized Pyongyang's responsibility for the incident, offered "deep regret," and promised to prevent a recurrence of similar events. South Korean Foreign Minister Yoo Chong Ha termed the North's statement an acceptable apology, thus clearing the way for continued South Korean participation on the agreed framework.

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