

2005 Carnegie International Non-Proliferation Conference
Negotiating with North Korea – Tuesday, November 8, 2005

In the North Korea discussion panel, Siegfried Hecker gave a briefing on the technical aspects of the North Korean nuclear program, Daniel Poneman analyzed the diplomatic aspects of the problem, and Chairperson Leon Sigal complemented the panel by adding his insights into the U.S. government position.

Hecker focused his presentation on the developments of North Korea's nuclear program. In the second crisis in 1993, the U.S. and North Korea reached the Framework Agreement in which North Korea agreed to freeze the 5MW reactor and facility and therefore halt the reprocessing of spent fuels, and to accept IAEA safeguards, on the condition that North Korea would receive a light water reactor in return. During the third crisis in January 2003, North Korea started to process HEU, withdrew from NPT, and expelled IAEA inspectors.

Through his two visits to North Korea, January 2004 and August 2005, he assessed the following:

- Plutonium: North Korea has been operating its 5MW reactor which can produce 5-7kg plutonium a year, and the reactor is still operating. The 50MW reactor was under construction in January 2004, but had moved towards completion by August 2005. They have most likely reprocessed around 43kg plutonium by now, and it is highly unlikely that they have more than 50kg.
- Nuclear weapons: we have to assume that North Korea can make and has made simple nuclear devices. If North Korea succeeds in extracting weapon-grade plutonium, they will be able to produce small nuclear bombs which are hard to find and easy to sell to others.
- Uranium: Nobody knows about their uranium program, but they had all the key components to build centrifuges in the 1990s. They may have some uranium enrichment capability.

He also mentioned that risk prioritization is important for the U.S. government because:

- If the plutonium were to fall into the hands of terrorists, we must work towards threat reduction - find the plutonium and secure it.
- If North Korea were capable of attacking the U.S., the U.S. would have to change its approach.

Poneman pointed out that the current situation is more dangerous than the previous crises because North Korea had withdrawn from IAEA, and the 50MW reactor has continued construction. He said the U.S. has two options: change the North Korean regime and eliminate the threat, or keep sending clear signals to North Korea and eventually persuade North Korea to give up nuclear weapons. Neither the U.S. nor North Korea knows which scenario will be realized. North Korea has not been forced by the international community to make the decision, either giving up nuclear weapons or accepting serious consequences for developing nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration has been struggling under more constraints than in 1994 because:

- The U.S. does not have military options anymore because they do not know where to attack. (In 1994, there was only one target – the 5MW reactor)
- The nature of six-party talks makes it difficult to reach agreement because it is hard to get all the countries involved, the relationship between the U.S. and South Korea has deteriorated, and there is less pressure from other parties.
- In 1994, North Korea was not producing plutonium, but now they are producing plutonium everyday, gaining more bargaining power as the negotiation and time go on.

The agreement in the six-party talks in September was to freeze all the nuclear programs including the uranium enrichment program. Poneman thinks the U.S. should allow North Korea to have a light water reactor so that North Korea would see the benefits of accepting the IAEA oversight and NPT regulations, and also because the two important participants of the six-party talks, China and South Korea, insist that North Korea should be allowed to have a LWR.

Sigal pointed out that hardliners within the Bush administration have a bad influence on the U.S. negotiation posture. They changed the words of the U.S. delegation on providing a LWR to North Korea, made Hill change his words on renouncing the military option and made the negotiation harder by imposing unnecessary preconditions. Sigal was afraid that the administration would not be successful in forming an international agreement and improving national security as long as hardliners dominate the foreign policy.

In response to questions from the audience, Sigal mentioned that Hill was suggesting we build the peace agreement with North Korea through confidence building and joint maintenance of the DMZ, which implied that there is some flexibility about normalization in the administration. Poneman pointed out that the risk of North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons would have a chain reaction affect on Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. He also mentioned that it is unlikely that North Korea will sell their nuclear materials to somebody else so long as their regime remains stable.