

John Bolton: Syria is providing "safe havens for North Korea's nuclear weapons development."

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Pyongyang's Upper Hand - Thanks to feckless diplomacy, Kim Jong Il may preserve his nuclear program.

The Six-Party talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program have now descended into a miasma of "working groups," one of which, on U.S.-North Korea bilateral issues, will meet this weekend in Geneva. It is worth paying attention to the outcome of this gathering.

North Korea wants to be taken off the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism and, as soon as possible, to enjoy full diplomatic relations with Washington. Pyongyang may well succeed, as many in the U.S. State Department seem more eager to grant full recognition to the Pyongyang dictatorship in North Korea than to the democracy in Taiwan. This would be a profound mistake on our part.

Nearly 200 days have passed since Feb. 13, when the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program produced an "agreement" to eliminate that program. Despite encomiums about the virtues of diplomacy, little real progress has been made in eliminating Pyongyang's program. Negotiations in July ended without agreement on a timetable, despite repeated State Department assurances since February that the North would be held to strict deadlines.

The Yongbyon reactor is shuttered, but that reactor was not frequently operational in the recent past, and may well be at the end of, or even beyond, its useful life. The return of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to Yongbyon provides North Korea with a new patina of respectability, despite the near certainty that significant nuclear activity is happening anywhere but Yongbyon.

In fact, the key change is that economic assistance is once again subsidizing and reinforcing Kim Jong Il's hold on power. Heavy fuel oil, food and other "humanitarian" assistance from South Korea, and substantial unpublicized aid from China are all flowing North. Cheeky Pyongyang is once again demanding that the outside world supply it with light-water nuclear reactors. The second North-South Summit in Pyongyang, postponed until October--closer to South Korea's presidential elections-- will provide renewed legitimacy to the North Korean dictatorship, and may bolster the political chances of South Korean advocates of appeasement, in turn providing Kim Jong Il even more breathing room.

Kim is once again besting the U.S. in accomplishing his two central strategic objectives: staying in power and preserving his nuclear-weapons program. The working groups currently underway do nothing to achieve the proper ends of U.S. foreign policy. A few weeks ago in Shenyang, China, the "denuclearization" working group met without visible progress, even on permanently dismantling Yongbyon.

There is still simply no evidence that Pyongyang has made a decision to abandon its long-held strategic objective to have a credible nuclear-weapons capability. This inconvenient fact should make it impossible for the State Department to concede on other issues, even if it were inclined to do so. Creative minds are therefore working on ways to explain that any forthcoming North Korean declaration of its nuclear capabilities is "full and complete," thus eliminating the remaining troubling obstacles to full normalization of relations.

Consider a possible North Korean "declaration," perhaps drafted with State's coaching, which would say something like this: "We manufactured two nuclear devices, one of which we detonated last October. We detonated the other earlier, but you didn't recognize it as a nuclear explosion. We currently have no nuclear devices. Our plutonium reprocessing efforts were not very successful, which explains why we only had two devices, neither of which produced large yields. We ultimately disposed of our limited remaining plutonium to others, and we have no idea where it now is. We currently have no plutonium. On uranium enrichment, we purchased some UF₆ and a small number of centrifuges for a test cascade from A.Q. Khan, but we could not progress due to inadequate funds. Accordingly, we long ago sold all but a small amount of the UF₆ and the centrifuges to third-parties. We will produce what little we have at Yongbyon shortly. That's it. Are we done now?"

Many will fall for this pretense of "full disclosure," especially those needing a diplomatic "success" to justify long years of faith in the Six-Party Talks. The alternative is to reject any North Korean declaration without full and timely verification. IAEA inspections alone are not enough. Its capacities are limited. Indeed, much of the IAEA's work is accomplished on the basis of intelligence provided by governments.

Precisely because our knowledge of the North's nuclear program is incomplete, we need an intrusive, indeed invasive, verification mechanism before having any confidence that North Korea's nuclear program is in fact being dismantled. We need smart and extensive verification activities inside North Korea, including no-notice inspections, a full range of sensors and sampling, unrestricted interviews and document reviews. If the North rejects effective verification, that is yet another basis to repudiate the Feb. 13 quicksand deal.

We need to know, among other things, precisely how many nuclear weapons the North has manufactured, how and where it manufactured them, how many it now has, and how much reprocessed plutonium remains available for weaponization. If any devices, fissile material or nuclear manufacturing equipment have left North Korea, we need to learn the specifics.

We need to understand the full extent of its uranium enrichment program, and if weapons-grade enriched uranium was produced, where it is and how much there is of it. We also need to know specifically if North Korea possesses any enriched uranium metal or any weapons- or missile warhead-design information.

President Bush has stressed that we must also deal with Pyongyang's biological, chemical and ballistic missile programs. We must address these programs, especially the missiles, soon. Failure to make explicit the important connection between weapons and delivery systems will certainly come back to haunt us, and we are on the verge of allowing this point to slip away entirely.

Finally, we need to learn the details of North Korean nuclear cooperation with other countries. We know that both Iran and Syria have long cooperated with North Korea on ballistic missile programs, and the prospect of cooperation on nuclear matters is not far-fetched. Whether and to what extent Iran, Syria or others might be "safe havens" for North Korea's nuclear weapons development, or may have already participated with or benefited from it, must be made clear.

For our own safety's sake, and that of allies like Japan and South Korea, there can be no compromises on these points.

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