

The Anatomy of a Failure: The Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994

January 2004

Wonhyuk Lim (KDI)

Since Washington challenged Pyongyang to come clean on its suspected uranium enrichment program in October 2002, following Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's historic visit to Pyongyang, the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework has all but collapsed. Although the Agreed Framework was by no means fail-proof, at the time of the signing, it was thought to provide a reasonable basis upon which the U.S. and North Korea (DPRK) could resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula and improve bilateral relations. Why did it then fail? As the Six-Party Talks are now underway, it would be useful to review the provisions of the Agreed Framework and understand why this previous agreement failed.

1. Provisions of the Geneva Agreed Framework

In Article I of the Agreed Framework, both sides agreed to replace North Korea's graphite-moderated reactors and related plutonium-reprocessing facilities with light-water reactors (LWRs), by a target date of 2003. Upon receipt of U.S. assurances for the provision of LWRs and arrangements for interim heavy oil shipments, North Korea agreed to "freeze" and "eventually dismantle" its nuclear facilities. LWRs were thought to be much more proliferation-proof than graphite-moderated reactors. Also, with the North Korean economy in serious trouble, there was some (wishful) speculation that the Pyongyang regime might collapse well before 2003. Although the nuclear "freeze" was not as satisfactory as immediate dismantlement, it was thought to be good enough based on these assumptions. In Article II, which has received relatively little attention in the press, the two sides agreed to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations." In Article III, the U.S. agreed to "provide formal assurances to the DPRK against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the U.S."; for its part, North Korea agreed to "take steps to implement the North-South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," which has a broader scope than the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). This provision was designed to prevent North Korea from embarking on a uranium enrichment program, in addition to the plutonium-reprocessing program covered by Article I. In Article IV, North Korea agreed to remain a party to the NPT and come into full compliance regarding its past nuclear activities when a significant portion of the LWR project is completed, but before delivery of key nuclear components.

2. Partial Implementation and Eventual Failure

The Agreed Framework thus addressed all the critical issues regarding the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula and U.S.-DPRK relations. In subsequent years, however, both Washington and Pyongyang only partially implemented this agreement. The construction of the LWRs was beset with delays, and the target date was pushed back by at least five years even before the *de facto* collapse of the agreement in 2002. The U.S. failed to take proactive measures to improve relations with North Korea until State Secretary Albright's visit to Pyongyang in 2000, following the Perry Process in 1999 and the historic inter-Korean summit in 2000. Any positive momentum generated by this move, however, quickly dissipated when the new Bush Administration openly expressed skepticism about North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Also, the U.S. guarantees against the threat or use of nuclear weapons were essentially nullified with the adoption of the pre-emption doctrine after 9/11. For its part, although North Korea maintained the freeze on its plutonium-reprocessing program, it secretly embarked on a uranium enrichment program around 1997. Was North Korea trying to have cake and eat it, too? Whether this secret move was motivated by North Korea's disillusionment with the U.S.—as some Korea watchers claim—is not clear.

3. Underlying Motives

Why is North Korea reluctant to scrap its nuclear program? Why is the United States reluctant to improve relations with North Korea? To understand why the Agreed Framework failed, it is imperative to look at the motives of both sides.

North Korea's nuclear program seems to serve three functions: a deterrent against security threats, a useful bargaining chip in diplomatic negotiations, and an important element of indigenous energy development, to utilize natural uranium reserves in North Korea. In 1994, North Korea's nuclear program was mainly used as a bargaining chip, but the Bush Administration's hardline policy toward North Korea has brought about a significant change. Although North Korea's long-range artillery serves as an effective deterrent against South Korea (ROK), North Korea increasingly seems to regard nuclear weapons as a possible deterrent against the U.S., especially in light of the Iraq War. Unless the U.S. credibly abandons what North Korea believes is "hostile policy" toward it, there is very little chance that North Korea will give up its nuclear program.

The reasons for the U.S. reluctance to improve relations with North Korea seem to be more complex. North Korea's track record does not make it a trustworthy partner, and despite the pledge to improve bilateral relations, there is a natural inclination to proceed slowly. The "W Factor," or George W. Bush's moral indignation against Kim Jong Il, aggravates the problem. Moreover, many Americans seem to have a serious problem with North Korea's tough negotiating style. For them, the thought of the world's only superpower getting "jerked around" by a rogue state is a little too much to accept. As a result, it is difficult to conduct negotiations and implement agreements involving mutual concessions between the U.S. and North Korea. Although these moral and emotional factors are important, there may also be a *strategic* value in keeping North Korea as a rogue state. The U.S. can use "irredeemable" North Korea not only as a convenient justification for such weapons programs as missile defense (MD), but also as a useful tool to keep Japan and South Korea from pursuing an more independent line of foreign policy. Instead of seeking a new order in Northeast Asia after the end of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers may be content to prolong the status quo. Conservatives in Japan and South Korea may be more than happy to go along as "junior partners" of the United States. As long as North Korea faithfully plays the role of a rogue state, this policy of "malign neglect" might prove effective. However, if the U.S., not North Korea, is perceived to be the stumbling block in the resolution of the nuclear problem, such a policy might lead to a nationalist backlash in Northeast Asia.

4. Outlook: Normative and Positive Dimensions

Against this background, the outline of a solution to the nuclear problem should be reasonably clear. The U.S. and North Korea should address the security concerns of each other. The U.S. should end what North Korea regards as "hostile policy" toward it. North Korea should dismantle its nuclear program. Through various programs to assist North Korea's economic development, the international community should convince North Korea that a non-nuclear future for North Korea will be better than a nuclear one. As the U.S. and North Korea both have credibility problems due to the failure of the Geneva Agreed Framework, top leaders from both sides, joined by concerned parties, should make personal commitments and take a series of steps to show that they are implementing the agreement in good faith. The 1994 agreement among U.S., Russian, and Ukraine presidents to remove nuclear weapons from Ukraine may be a good benchmark in this regard.

Will the Six-Party Talks lead to such a solution? Preliminary signs indicate it is quite unlikely. Far more likely is a gridlock in which both the U.S. and North Korea wait for a regime change

on the other side. North Korea is not likely to abandon its nuclear program unless the U.S. makes a credible commitment to improve relations with North Korea. Yet U.S. hardliners are just paying lip service to “dialogue” (not “negotiation”) and are essentially waiting for North Korea to overreact to U.S. pressure tactics so that they can persuade South Korea and China to go along with U.S.-led “multilateral” sanctions. It appears that North Korea has all but run out of “moderate” cards to play (e.g., kicking out IAEA monitors) in response to U.S. pressure. Should North Korea make a bomb a month despite warnings from South Korea and China, for example, they would have little choice but to go along with the U.S. and seek alternatives. Knowing this, however, North Korea is likely to prolong the crisis at a manageable level and maintain reasonably good relations with South Korea and China. Unless the U.S. is willing to provide credible security guarantees, North Korea is likely to hunker down and wait for the outcome of the 2004 U.S. election, if not 2008.