

NHK Interview: September 3, 2008

Question 1. Why has North Korea ceased its cooperation with the dismantlement of its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon?

Answer: North Korea wants a compromise with the USA regarding verification. That is why Pyongyang has allowed the IAEA and US Department of Energy staff to remain at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Facility.

The US wants verification involving four steps:

1. Documentation of prior nuclear reactor operation
2. Interviews with DPRK staff at Yongbyon,
3. Inspections of selected nuclear related sites at Yongbyon, and
4. Sampling of nuclear waste chemicals previously used to separate plutonium from the spent uranium fuel rods.

North Korea has agreed to steps 1 and 2, and it might eventually accept step 3 if the US gives it something of great value to the DPRK. Step 4, however, North Korea rejected in 1993 which led to the first nuclear crisis. Once again North Korea is refusing to allow anyone to take samples of its nuclear waste at Yongbyon. Analysis of such samples is the most reliable way to determine how much plutonium North Korea has previously produce. This is the only “internationally” acceptable method to “verify” the claims in the declaration that the DPRK gave to China in July 2008.

Nevertheless, the Bush Administration is pressing for a compromise so that President Bush can declare a foreign policy success regarding North Korea. (Thus SecState Rice recently visited Libya to make a similar point). A compromise still might be possible, but it depends entirely on how much the US is willing to give the DPRK and how much the DPRK will demand for its cooperation.

Question 2. What is the purpose of Six Party chief delegates gathering in Beijing on September 4, 2008?

Answer: The US will press China to be tough on North Korea. Washington hopes also to demonstrate to China that South Korea and Japan are in full cooperation with Washington, i.e. present a united front to both Beijing and Pyongyang. China most likely it politely but firmly deflect US demands for pressure on Pyongyang, explaining that it would accomplish nothing. Also China can be expected to urge the US and its allies to fulfill their pledge to provide HFO to the DPRK by the end of October 2008.

All the parties, including Pyongyang, want a compromise. Seoul wants peace and prosperity, the USA a foreign policy success, North Korea an end to US sanctions, and China a peaceful negotiated settlement and stability in the region.

But once again the problem to be resolved is how much the US and North Korea are willing to give and take from each other. Eventually, Japan and Russia will have to accept what ever the other Six Party Talks participants manage to work out. Here Japan lacks leverage on the nuclear issue because it refuses to contribute anything

toward energy assistance for the DPRK while pressing Pyongyang to respond concretely regarding progress on the abduction issue.