

North Korea and the U.S. Terrorism List

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The possible resumption of the Six Party Talks as early as June does not necessarily mean that North Korea may soon escape the U.S. List of Nations Supporting Terrorism, the so-called “terrorism list.” North Korea has two goals regarding removal from the list, one economic and the other political. Its economic goal is so it can reinvigorate its economy by inviting Americans investment and increase bilateral trade with the United States. The political goal is equally if not more important - prevent resumption of trilateral cooperation between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul.

Pyongyang’s strategy of “dividing the allies” blocked trilateral cooperation since 2001. For ten years President’s Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun’s “sunshine diplomacy” benefited Pyongyang economically and politically. Politically it caused tensions in the US-South Korea alliance. US chief negotiator to the Six Party Talks Christopher Hill unwittingly helped Pyongyang when he promised his North Korean counterpart Kim Gye Kwan in January 2007 to do his best to get it removed from the U.S. terrorism list. Pyongyang exploited Hill’s error by insisting that the United States must drop it from the terrorism list before it would file a “complete and verifiable declaration of its nuclear programs.” Tensions in the US-Japan alliance subsequently intensified because of Tokyo’s insistence that Pyongyang remain on the list until the abduction issue had been resolved.

But three recent developments have made the situation less favorable for Pyongyang. President Lee Myung Bak has ended “sunshine diplomacy” and stiffened Seoul’s stance toward Pyongyang. Hill’s excessive confidence that North Korea would fulfill its promises to him has fragmented political support in Washington for his “smile diplomacy” tactics toward North Korea. Finally North Korea once again has severely damaged its credibility by assisting Syria with construction of a nuclear reactor after making numerous promises not to proliferation nuclear technology.

These developments could make it much harder for Pyongyang to get off the “terrorism list.” Pyongyang’s cooperation with Syria and Hill’s angering of the Japan, the primary US ally in East Asia, have rallied a solid political coalition in Washington that includes President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the State Department’s Assistant Secretary for Nuclear Proliferation, many ranking Defense Department officials and a

powerful bipartisan group of Senators and Congressmen. They favor a resumption of trilateral cooperation with Tokyo and Seoul, and insist upon rigorous verification of North Korea's declaration of its nuclear materials and programs before the U.S. will do anything regarding the "terrorism list." This means that Ambassador Hill has lost the ability to unilaterally decide how to deal with Pyongyang.

Regarding the "terrorism list," there is a huge difference between promising to remove North Korea from it and actually doing it. North Korea has been hoping to get off the list since October 2000 when the Clinton Administration promised Pyongyang that "the U.S. will work in cooperation with the DPRK" to remove it from the "list of state sponsors of terrorism." After nearly eight years, that has not happened. Now only President Bush, after consulting numerous officials in the executive and legislative branches of the US government can make such a decision.

As President Bush recently confirmed to Japan and South Korea, Washington's priorities remain sustaining the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances as the basis of US defense strategy in Northeast Asia. Secretary Rice then emphasized at the end of April that North Korea's declaration of its nuclear programs and materials must be thoroughly verified before the US would move to fulfill its pledge to North Korea regarding the terrorism list.

North Korea's dramatic delivery of 18,000 documents to the U.S. regarding operation of the Yongbyon Nuclear Center reactor is, according to Department of State, only the "first step" in the verification process. Actually the documents may prove marginally important. North Korea has claimed that it produced 30 kilograms of plutonium but the United States counters with a claim of 50 to 60 kilograms. It is common sense that North Korea would not provide documents that prove its claim inaccurate and that of the United States accurate.

The only reliable method to verify North Korea's claim is for nuclear experts to obtain samples of the chemicals used by North Korea to separate plutonium from its uranium fuel rods. The current situation resembles what sparked the first Korean nuclear crisis in 1993 – verification. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1992 found evidence that North Korea's claim of plutonium production was too small. North Korea refused to allow the IAEA to obtain samples at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, triggering the first nuclear crisis. But after the United States promised to build North Korea two nuclear reactors, Pyongyang promised that it would "cooperate fully with the IAEA" after the reactors had become operational. We should expect North Korea today to demand a similarly high price for its cooperation with the verification process. Negotiating such an arrangement surely would require considerable time.

Meanwhile North Korea most likely will remain on the U.S. terrorism list. After all, it is doubtful that President Bush would risk permanent damage to the US-Japan alliance in exchange for North Korea's partial cooperation regarding the end of its nuclear arsenal.

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