

# For North Korea, Verifying Requires Reconciling: The Lesson from a Troubled Past— Part I

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The usual story going around Washington is that North Korea has no intention to denuclearize or to provide a complete and accurate declaration of all its nuclear facilities and inventory and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to verify that declaration. According to this story, North Korea [renege on promises](#) to take these steps in the past, and instead, temporarily suspended production of plutonium, impeded unfettered access for IAEA inspectors, secretly sought the means to enrich uranium, expelled the inspectors, and resumed plutonium production when its enrichment activity was challenged.

This narrative is incomplete and misleading, because it ignores the crucial link between Pyongyang's willingness to accept US requests for verification and Washington's willingness to take steps to end enmity with North Korea. There is, in short, another way to interpret the troubled history of US-North Korean negotiations on verification.

## **No Verification without Reconciliation**

Invoking international law as decreed by the UN Security Council and imposing UN sanctions to punish North Korean transgressions—the crime-and-punishment approach—has never worked with Pyongyang. North Korea views verification as a path to a fundamentally new relationship with the United States. In return for denuclearization steps, it wants Washington, in the words of the [Agreed Framework](#) that the two signed in 1994, to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations”—or end enmity and reconcile, starting with a peace declaration and some easing of or exemptions from US sanctions.

To judge from what North Korean officials have told US officials and ex-officials for years, reconciliation entails the normalization of political and economic relations, a “peace regime” on the Korean Peninsula, and potentially an alliance like the one the United States has with South Korea that would be backed by a continuing US troop presence on the peninsula rather than withdrawal. Pyongyang has offered to dismantle its Yongbyon nuclear complex in return for “corresponding measures” and hinted that it is willing to let the United States, not the IAEA, monitor that dismantlement.

Pyongyang has seen the IAEA as treating it unfairly ever since 1993, when the Agency demanded a special inspection of its nuclear waste sites to determine whether it had reprocessed more plutonium than it had initially declared in 1992. Pyongyang likely views the IAEA as a US accomplice in the crime-and-punishment approach. And since the IAEA cannot satisfy the

North's desire for US reciprocity, never mind get Washington to reconcile, it likely wants US inspectors on the hook for verification—at least for now—to assure compliance.

Washington has moved part way to satisfy Pyongyang. It has put the peace declaration on the negotiating table. And it is no longer insisting on a complete declaration of North Korea's nuclear assets as the first step in implementing the commitment it [made](#) at the Singapore Summit to “work toward complete denuclearization.” Instead, it seems prepared to phase in the declaration, starting with the location of its plutonium reactors, reprocessing and enrichment sites. Before asking for the amount of fissile material and number of weapons, it will seek access to the North's nuclear test sites, uranium mines and sites where the uranium ore is refined and turned into a gas for enriching. This [nuclear archeology](#) will better enable it to assess how much fissile material the North could have produced. Vice President Mike Pence [hinted](#) at this nuclear archeology on November 15 when he spoke of “a plan ... for identifying all the development sites,” and “allowing for inspection of the sites.”

### **The Initial Declaration**

On September 27, 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced the removal of all US nuclear weapons from Korea. Within a month, North Korea halted the reprocessing of spent fuel to extract plutonium. On December 31, it concluded a Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with South Korea pledging not to “possess facilities for nuclear reprocessing and enrichment.” On January 7, 1992, with President Bush in Seoul, South Korea announced the suspension of the annual Team Spirit joint military exercises. That very day, a DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesman announced its intention to sign a safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

On January 22, 1992, the first ever high-level meeting between a US and DPRK official took place with Under Secretary of State Arnold Kanter and Kim Yong Sun, the Korean Workers' Party secretary for international affairs. On March 14, 1992, Pyongyang agreed to set up a Joint Nuclear Control Commission with Seoul to monitor their denuclearization accord. On April 10, the DPRK Supreme Assembly ratified its safeguards agreement with the IAEA. The following month, IAEA Director-General Hans Blix made an official visit to Yongbyon during which he toured the unfinished reprocessing plant and received a 150-page initial declaration inventorying Pyongyang's nuclear material and equipment.

This sequence strongly suggests North Korea's willingness to accommodate the United States on verification in return for US steps to end enmity.

### **What's So Special about a Special Inspection?**

During the Blix visit, DPRK officials asked for the IAEA's help to acquire light-water reactors and supply them with nuclear fuel in return for abandoning reprocessing, a request that the IAEA had no ability to satisfy. When the North Koreans repeated the request to US diplomats in Beijing on June 1, Washington dismissed the idea out of hand. Things went downhill from there. The most surprising revelation in its declaration was that North Korea had reprocessed spent fuel once, extracting 90 grams of plutonium. In July 1992, an IAEA inspector took smear samples

that revealed an “[anomaly](#)” in that declaration. They showed that the North had conducted reprocessing on three separate occasions in 1989, 1990 and 1991.

The IAEA reached no firm conclusion about the amount of plutonium extracted. Some US intelligence estimates put that amount at 1-2 bombs’ worth. Subsequent analysis by the nuclear labs would call that amount into question; it estimated the range from 90 grams to less than a bomb’s worth. But the original estimate would drive policy for many years to come and would prompt the IAEA to ask for a special inspection of nuclear waste sites at Yongbyon on February 12, 1993, a request that the North rejected.

Even worse, on October 8, 1992, Washington and Seoul decided to resume the Team Spirit joint military exercises the following March. At an October 22 meeting to work out nuclear inspections, the North demanded that the South cancel Team Spirit, or it would call off the talks on the Joint Nuclear Control Commission to implement verification. On March 8, 1993, Team Spirit kicked off. On March 12, the DPRK Foreign Minister [gave](#) 90 days’ notice of its intent to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), citing the Team Spirit “nuclear war rehearsal” and the IAEA Board of Governors’ “unjust” demand. From that point on, it would allow the IAEA to monitor some Yongbyon sites “for the continuity of safeguards” but, citing its unique status with regard to the NPT, it has never again allowed ad hoc routine inspections.

Failure to remain on the road to reconciliation had thrown nuclear inspections into a ditch.

### **The 1994 Agreed Framework**

The “decision” to “withdraw” from the NPT was not final: the DPRK [told](#) the UN Security Council it would last “until the US nuclear threats and the unjust conduct of the IAEA against the DPRK will be recognized to have been removed.” It was an opening to diplomatic give-and-take that Washington seized.

On June 11, 1993, the United States agreed with the DPRK in their first ever joint statement to the principles of: “Assurances against threat and use of force, including nuclear weapons; peace and security in a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, including impartial application of full-scope safeguards, mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; and support for the reunification of Korea.”

The North, in turn, “decided unilaterally to suspend as long as it considers necessary the effectuation of its withdrawal” from the NPT.

Months of back and forth between Washington and Pyongyang resulted in some forward movement but diplomacy broke down in March 1993 with the collapse of the “Super Tuesday,” arrangement intended to secure forward movement in the North’s discussions with South Korea and the International Atomic Energy Agency, both important players in dealing with the nuclear issue. The crisis reached a climax in May 1994 when the North began unloading plutonium-laden spent fuel from its reactor but was defused when former President Jimmy Carter met with Kim Il Sung.

Four months of further negotiations yielded the 1994 Agreed Framework that October. In return for US willingness to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations,” including the provision of two light-water reactors and heavy fuel oil in the interim, the DPRK suspended the operation of its reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon pending their eventual dismantlement and put the spent nuclear fuel unloaded from its reactor that May into dry casks under around-the-clock monitoring by the IAEA for “continuity of safeguards.”

Upon completion of the supply contract for the reactors, the North pledged to permit ad hoc and routine inspections; it also promised that once a “significant portion” of the LWR project was completed, but before delivery of key nuclear components, it would come into full compliance with its safeguards agreement and take all the steps deemed necessary by the IAEA to verify the accuracy of its questionable 1992 initial declaration of nuclear material. The North thereupon shut down the reactor and reprocessing plant and granted access for the IAEA to monitor it.

The accord showed how steps to end enmity might facilitate verification. But again, hopes would soon be dashed.

### **Scrapping the Agreed Framework**

In 1997, after Washington had taken only minimal steps to end enmity, was slow to get the reactor project off the ground, and had seldom delivered the promised heavy fuel oil on schedule, the DPRK began warning that if the United States did not live up to the Agreed Framework, it was not obliged to do so either. It soon began to acquire the means to enrich uranium from Pakistan and elsewhere. Yet it made no attempt to reprocess the spent fuel stored under monitoring at Yongbyon or to restart its reactor. Six years would elapse before it would do so. By then, according to US intelligence estimates, it had foregone generating enough fissile material for 100 nuclear weapons. It had also allowed its nuclear facilities, worth many millions of dollars, to deteriorate to a point where they could not be salvaged.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration, seizing on intelligence that the North was stepping up its acquisition of centrifuges and other uranium enrichment equipment, confronted it in October 2002. Spurning a North Korean offer to negotiate on the issue and ignoring opposition from South Korea and Japan, Washington suspended shipments of promised energy aid, thereby tearing up the Agreed Framework.

While US forces were tied down preparing to invade Iraq, North Korea retaliated by expelling the IAEA inspectors. It then reprocessed the spent fuel removed from the reactor in 1994 and extracted five or six bombs’ worth of plutonium, which, when weaponized, would allow it to conduct nuclear tests for the first time. It also moved to restart its reactor, ramped up its enrichment effort, and aided Syria in constructing a reactor of its own.

Had Washington lived up to its obligations, would Pyongyang have done so? There is no way to know for sure. But IAEA monitoring was the first victim of US failure to reconcile.

More tit-for-tat on verification was still to come.

