

US-DPRK: The Second Phase of the Nuclear Crisis, or “Who Started What”

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The accepted American version of the story about the start of the second phase of the nuclear crisis, and which is customary for audiences of non-Korea experts, usually goes something like this: “in 2003, against the background of the success of the American army in Iraq, North Korea announced that it possessed nuclear weapons”, and then removed the seals from its nuclear reactor, withdrew from the NPT and expelled IAEA officials from the country.

Of course, the “carefully selected” official date of the beginning of the crisis already contains an answer to the question of “Who started it first?” and, consequently, “Who is to blame?”. Furthermore, it would be more correct to commence the countdown from the moment when the special envoy of the US President, George Kelly, accused Pyongyang that the DPRK was secretly carrying out nuclear research, and that a representative of North Korea had allegedly admitted this to him openly. However, it would be even more correct to recall what preceded this event.

During the first 20 months after Bush came to power, there had been practically no foreign policy contacts between the two countries. The United States had actually begun to boycott the implementation of the framework agreement¹: security guarantees for the DPRK were left hanging in the air; deliveries of fuel oil as compensation for stopping North Korean gas-cooled reactors capable of stock-piling weapons-grade plutonium were suspended (Washington tried to change the rules of the game, stating that fuel would be shipped to the DPRK in response to a change in the political structure and democratic reform, and then completely “turned off the tap”); there was no longer any talk of establishing dialogue at the diplomatic level; deadlines for bringing the “light” water reactors online (2003) were finally broken, by 2002 only the concrete foundations had been [laid](#).

The South Koreans themselves explained matters in the following way: “From the very beginning the project was implemented with breaches of schedule. Construction was repeatedly suspended for a long time, and the supply of fuel oil also stopped. There were many reasons for this: Pyongyang’s test of a medium-range ballistic missile, the construction of certain underground facilities, theoretically suitable for secret nuclear development. ... A considerable amount had been invested into the project, more than 1.5 million USD, which is almost 35 percent complete. The foundation pit was dug; all the necessary communications were completed; and all the infrastructure facilities have been built”.

Frankly speaking, declarations of this sort speak for themselves, since their authors quite openly admit that construction was suspended not due to technical problems or due to counteractions by DPRK, but as a result of a change in the political situation during the 1998 crisis around Kumchang-ni and the launching of a Korean satellite.

Of course, there could have been many reasons for the suspension of construction, and the financial crisis of 1997 could significantly have undermined the capabilities of the Republic of Korea, which bore the main burden of the costs of KEDO. Thus the question of whether this was deliberate sabotage or initial reluctance on the part of the participating countries to invest seriously in this expensive project, remains open. As well as rumors that a significant portion of KEDO's funds was trivially squandered.

However, what is important here is that with the imminent approach of the date when the nuclear power stations were due to become operational, there was an increased probability that the unambiguous question (here the facts speak clearly for themselves), of who was the first to violate the Agreed Framework would be raised by the North Koreans: and in a context which could be very unpleasant for their partners. In such a situation, it is quite easy to conclude that, just like 10 years ago, the nuclear card was played at the "right" moment so as not to allow North Korea to shrug off its demonised image.

In the autumn of 2002, the US accused the DPRK of violating the Agreed Framework. According to statements made by J. Kelly in October 2002, the North Koreans initially denied having a program for manufacturing enriched uranium, and then admitted it. However, the text of this "admission" is well known and sounds like this:

North Korea has the right to have not only nuclear weapons, but also all kinds of weapons, including even more powerful ones, in order to defend its sovereignty and right to existence from the ever-increasing nuclear threat of the United States.

The author considers that it is far from easy to establish the presence of a subtext such as: "all this time we deceived you".

The "treachery of the DPRK" was also "evident" in that, if the framework agreement referred to the freezing of a programme connected with the manufacture of weapons-grade plutonium, there was no reference to the uranium program, and, according to critics of Pyongyang, the North wanted in this way to achieve a new set of exemptions. However, if the DPRK is to be accused of legal chicanery of this kind, then equivalent charges also apply to the United States.

In addition, no direct evidence clearly indicating that at the specified time the DPRK was secretly working on enriching uranium or plutonium during the term of the agreement, has ever been presented. This is important. Especially when one takes into account the general anti-North Korean rhetoric where every simple mistake could be turned against them. If the United States had been possessed of facts which could have been presented as evidence, then by analogy with all the clamour raised in connection with Iraqi WMD, this information would actively have been used for propaganda purposes both then and later.

Indirect evidence of the lack of such activities is the subsequent rate of development of the DPRK nuclear programme after the continuation of the crisis. If such work was indeed being carried out, the rate would have been much higher.

In the wake of ensuing accusations against the North Koreans for breaching the “spirit of the Agreement” (since the text contained nothing referring to a ban on acquiring enriched uranium), the United States “forgot” that the Bush administration had originally considered it to be document without legal force, and had not attempted to fulfill their part of the contract. Now they deemed it a fully fledged agreement which had been breached by the regime of Kim Jong Il. In general terms, and even in the opinion of Ms. Albright, the United States had demonstrated inflexibility by abandoning bilateral talks and displaying reticence to restate the 2000 joint declaration of the absence of hostile intent. As a result the Agreed Framework was denounced by both sides.

The reaction was not long in coming. The North Koreans warned Washington that they might withdraw from the moratorium on testing ballistic missiles and the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement. They also issued a warning that they could attack American military installations anywhere in the world, if the Americans undertook a preemptive strike against their territory. The final slam of the door came in response to the US decision to halt once and for all fuel oil supplies to the DPRK. On the January 10, 2003, the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and expelled IAEA specialists from the country.

So the answer to the question of “who is to blame?” is not actually a matter of American propaganda. It is an unconditional fact that the DPRK’s partners breached their obligations. In theory, the extent of these violations (the de facto complete failure to fulfill their obligations) completely enabled the DPRK to renege on its part of the agreement. However, the counter actions of the DPRK and its own rhetoric in this crisis situation were in themselves far from flawless, and essentially led to more fuel being poured on the fire.

The issue of the uranium program is still open. However, even if we imagine that evidence might be found, there remains one unpleasant factor: in 2002, Pyongyang was clearly aware that their partners were culpable of the systematic violation of the terms of the agreement, and furthermore to such an extent that the entire agreement was rendered void. It remains a rhetorical question as to whether there is any further point in observing an agreement which is to your own detriment.

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