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The Process in Place

By ROSE GOTTEMOELLER

Washington

NEGOTIATORS in Beijing have left the most recent round of the six-nation talks on stability and nuclear disarmament on the Korean Peninsula confronted with a North Korean demand that they could have seen coming. Pyongyang wants to retain the right to build light-water reactors and wants the other parties in the talks - China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and especially the United States - to guarantee that right.

The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty does allow its signatories access to peaceful nuclear technologies, which was an important incentive for the states that do not possess nuclear weapons to join the treaty regime in the first place. North Korea, however, withdrew from the treaty in 2003 and subsequently declared itself to have nuclear weapons, so whether it should benefit from peaceful nuclear technology cooperation with the rest of the world is a legitimate question. The Bush administration quite clearly believes that the North Koreans should not, a position that long predates the current round of negotiations.

It seems a shame, however, to let this issue produce an impasse, since the North Koreans have reiterated their willingness to eliminate their nuclear weapons program, and the United States has shown new flexibility in its willingness to talk directly to them. This is a basis on which to build progress, not to walk away.

Sometimes in a difficult negotiation it makes the most sense to point silently to a principle already established and then move to bolster that principle from an entirely new direction. In the case of North Korea, we are lucky enough to have the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, or KEDO, which was established under the Clinton administration to build light-water reactors in North Korea. It has been derided by the Bush administration from the outset as a hapless giveaway that only encouraged the North Koreans to misbehave.

Despite this sharp criticism, the Bush administration has not killed the organization outright. The current position of the Bush team is that the organization is in a holding pattern, pending developments with North Korea. The light-water reactor construction project has been suspended, but preservation and maintenance work at the site continues. According to the organization, referring to North Korea by the initials of its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Suspension implies that KEDO and the D.P.R.K. will continue to observe the applicable provisions of the agreements and protocols concluded between them."

The Bush administration would not have to embrace the organization with any new enthusiasm. It would only have to permit this arrangement to continue - silently allowing the principle to stand.

Next would come the interesting part - building up the principle from another direction.

The crux of the Bush administration's concern has been that cooperative projects in the nuclear

arena would somehow abet Pyongyang in its drive for the bomb. But a lot can be done in the world of peaceful nuclear cooperation that does not involve light-water reactors or technology that might have application to a nuclear weapons program. Medicine, agriculture, industry and mining applications - these are all nuclear research areas of great utility to the North Korean economy that would not lead to a nuclear bomb.

Once again, Washington already has a mechanism at hand, a well-established program that would open new directions for peaceful nuclear cooperation with North Korea at very little cost. The Sister Laboratory program was first organized in the 1980's under the Energy Department to fulfill an obligation under the nonproliferation treaty to share peaceful uses of nuclear technology. It brings together experts in American national laboratories with their counterparts in developing countries. In the nine countries where sister laboratories are in place, projects include radioisotope production, nuclear waste management and environmental, safety and health surveillance.

The point of the Sister Laboratory program is to build mutual confidence and transparency in a low-key way, without major transfers of funds, equipment or materials. The focus is on exchanges between scientists and on developing new areas of collaboration, including longer-term spinoffs. This message should be very welcome to the North Koreans. The United States, in its turn, has been able to leverage the relationships to establish new joint work in the nonproliferation arena - exactly the goal that Washington seeks with North Korea.

If the United States decides to introduce the Sister Laboratory concept into the six-nation talks, it need not do so alone. We already have rich and productive scientist-to-scientist cooperation with several of our negotiating partners, which could share the risks of developing such an endeavor with North Korea. Indeed, Russia has particularly good contacts with North Korean scientists, many of whom trained at Russian universities in the Soviet era.

When the six-nation talks resume in a week or so, they need to build momentum in a way that does not cost any one participant too much political capital. The United States should be satisfied that no light-water reactors will be built in North Korea for the foreseeable future. The North Koreans, in turn, should be satisfied that they are still in the running for peaceful nuclear cooperation.

The trick will be to ensure that this satisfaction quietly grows into mutual confidence, creating the conditions under which North Korea will give up its military nuclear program and join in broader cooperation with its neighbors and the United States.

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