After 25 months of on-and-off negotiations, the six-party talks finally produced a milestone joint statement on September 19, stipulating goals and principles leading to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Yet, as the failure of a subsequent November round to achieve significant progress makes clear, this is only the beginning of another long journey full of surprises and uncertainties.

As the parties participating in the talks with North Korea—China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States—seek to move forward, they must take heed of the disappointing history of nuclear negotiations (see sidebar). Occurring every few years since 1991, these nuclear negotiations show a clear cyclical pattern. First, there is a crisis, then there is an improvised and incomplete nuclear deal. Then, the deal collapses, and another crisis erupts.

The cycle reflects a number of recurring patterns. The United States tends to neglect relations with North Korea aside from crises. Once the two sides negotiate, deep distrust and animosity makes compromise, middle-ground solutions on most issues very difficult. The result is that Pyongyang and Washington only paper over differences before they begin the cycle anew.

North Korea bears much of the responsibility for this litany of failures. North Korea has a habit of reopening negotiations in order to squeeze out additional rewards or delay the fulfillment of its own obligations. Even worse, North Korea also tends to renege and withdraw from agreements once the cream is skimmed off the top or pressure is gone.

Yet, the United States also bears its share of the blame. Pyongyang’s frustrating negotiating tactics have led Washington to pursue an “all or nothing” approach in which it has demanded airtight and complete agreements with North Korea rather than more limited measures. Until Pyongyang becomes a more responsible member of the international community, however, the chances of reaching such a detailed agreement with Pyongyang are very low, while the diplomatic and financial cost of not achieving this goal is very high.

Rather than seeking a perfect agreement, the United States would be better off concentrating on following up and managing incremental agreements, something which it has thus far neglected to do. Building on such incremental promises and implementations offers the best chance of moving the six parties to the next level.

It is a good sign for the future of the talks that, by its actions in September, the United States seems to have decided on this more practical and incremental approach. In addition, new political and security trends on the Korean peninsula and in the Northeast Asian region are helping to form a favorable environment for the resolution of the nuclear issue. Despite lingering uncertainties and doubts—and history—there are substantial grounds for believing that the six-party process will yield real progress in ending the North Korean nuclear program permanently.

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Competing Approaches and Solutions

Behind the previous negotiating failures lie inconsistencies in policy toward the North Korean nuclear issue both in the United States and South Korea and between the two allies. Internal conflicts in both countries between hawks and doves have often led to paralysis in decision-making processes and a failure to take timely actions. In addition, the consultation and coordination process between the United States and South Korea has often been neither smooth nor effective. Fortunately, both within and among the two capitals, policymakers now seem to have agreed on a fairly consistent approach to the talks.

Since 1991, Washington and Seoul have generally pursued four schools of thought and approaches to the North Korean nuclear issue: collapse, non-engagement, negotiation, and sunshine (See Table 1).

Washington has tended to fall into one of two camps. The first was a set of policies enacted in President George W. Bush’s first term that were directed to end the North Korean regime: collapse. Despite the emotional appeal in the United States of terminating the evil North Korean regime, the collapse approach was neither welcomed nor supported in the Northeast Asian region, as it tended to feed confrontation and crisis and led to North Korea’s withdrawal and isolation from the international community.

The second most common U.S. approach, non-engagement, has involved pursuing a strategy of muddling through in an attempt to avoid either military measures or appeasement. This approach is both reactive and crisis prone, thus prolonging the status quo of nuclear stalemate. From 1995 to 2000, this policy toward North Korea was not so much a result of choice as it was a stalemate resulting from the confrontation between the Clinton administration and the Republican Congress over North Korea policy. By contrast, during Bush’s first term, non-engagement was sometimes followed as well, at times as a conscious choice and at other times as a reflection of a stalemate between the Department of State and other officials over North Korea policy. This stalemate persisted until Bush made a conscious choice to pursue dialogue seriously this year.

Seoul, on the other hand, has tended to follow two other sets of policies on the other end of the policy spectrum from Washington: sunshine and negotiations. The Kim Dae-jung government (1998-2002) pursued a sunshine policy tainted with nationalistic sentiment toward the North. This policy called on the United States and South Korea to take a number of steps to placate North Korea without requiring that North Korea first reciprocate.

The best policy results, such as the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2005 Joint Statement, have been achieved when both Seoul and Washington have actively pursued a policy of negotiation. It was only after much trial and error, for example, that the Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations agreed this year that Washington’s

Table 1 Four Approaches to the North Korean Nuclear Issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views on North Korea</th>
<th>Collapse</th>
<th>Non-Engagement</th>
<th>Negotiation</th>
<th>Sunshine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Axis of evil; immoral state.</td>
<td>Rogue state; problem state.</td>
<td>Normal country.</td>
<td>Fraternal country; divided half to be unified.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear Intention</td>
<td>Nuclear arming; threat to peace.</td>
<td>Nuclear arming for survival.</td>
<td>Negotiation card and/or nuclear arming.</td>
<td>Negotiation card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions</td>
<td>Regime change; military measures; Iraqi case.</td>
<td>Sanctions; neglect; Libya.</td>
<td>Negotiations; reciprocity and verification; Ukraine case.</td>
<td>Security assurances first; no military measures and diplomacy only.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recurring North Korean Nuclear Crises

The past 15 years have seen a series of nuclear crises on the Korean peninsula, followed by agreements that collapsed, precipitating new crises. Some crises have been conspicuous and acute, others less so.

The First Crisis
The first nuclear crisis occurred when North Korea refused to sign a full-scope safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). When North Korea joined the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in December 1985, it was obliged to sign a safeguards agreement within 18 months. Taking advantage of an IAEA mistake in sending a wrong document, North Korea refused to meet the first deadline of June 1987 and then failed to meet a second deadline of December 1988. The crisis ended in December 1991 when North Korea suddenly accepted a South Korean proposal to denuclearize the Korean peninsula, the Joint Denuclearization Declaration, and signed the long-overdue safeguards agreement in January 1992. The United States then rewarded Pyongyang by suspending annual U.S.-South Korean “Team Spirit” military exercises and arranging the first-ever meeting of high-ranking U.S. and North Korean officials in New York.

The Second Crisis
The first nuclear package deal collapsed a year later, however, when North Korea realized that the U.S.-North Korean high-level meeting would prove a one-time event and that the Team Spirit exercises were to resume in early 1993. Meetings between South Korea and North Korea under a Joint Nuclear Control Commission fizzled.

In addition, when the IAEA pressed for special inspections on suspected nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, North Korea announced in March 1993 its withdrawal from the NPT, thus bringing about another crisis on the peninsula. The United States responded by opening a new round of negotiations, which produced a joint statement in which North Korea “decided unilaterally to suspend as long as it considers necessary the effectuation of its withdrawal from the NPT.” In return, the United States provided North Korea with assurances against the threat and use of force. The United States also promised to continue a dialogue among equals with North Korea.

The Third Crisis
In May 1994, North Korea surprised the world by blatantly and in the absence of IAEA inspectors unloading spent fuel from the five-megawatt graphite-moderated reactor at Yongbyon, providing it with the means of producing plutonium that could be used in nuclear weapons.

These North Korean provocations put Pyongyang on a crash course with Washington and nearly led to a war on the peninsula as the Clinton administration began reviewing surgical-strike options against North Korean nuclear facilities. Amid a heightened crisis, the United States and North Korea were pressed to choose between war and a nuclear deal. At this point, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter intervened and struck a deal with then-North Korean President Kim Il Sung. This dramatic intervention led to an agreement known as the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994.

The agreement was a nuclear-for-nuclear package deal: North Korea would freeze and eventually dismantle its graphite-modemated nuclear fuel cycle, and in return, the United States and its allies would provide “proliferation-resistant” light-water reactors (LWRs) in addition to other means of economic and diplomatic compensation. Further, the IAEA would be able to account for what North Korea had done with all of its spent fuel.

Once again, though, the nuclear deal was not fully implemented. Most importantly, the United States was never enthusiastic about the idea of providing the LWRs, with some Clinton administration critics saying the reactors represented a type of bribe and that fuel from them could still be diverted to nuclear weapons use. Major construction work to build the LWRs started only in 2000, six years after the conclusion of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Additionally, the Clinton administration, under attack from Republicans in Congress for supposedly succumbing to Pyongyang’s nuclear blackmail, only partially implemented its commitment to ending economic sanctions and improving U.S.-North Korean relations. For its part, North Korea rejected IAEA inspection requests needed to determine what it had done with its spent fuel.

The Fourth Crisis
Still, the two countries managed to muddle through the 1990s without a conflict, and the freeze at Yongbyon remained in place. In October 2002, however, the United States accused North Korea of developing the capabilities to enrich uranium (another potential building block for nuclear weapons), in violation of the 1991 Joint Denuclearization Declaration and the 1994 Agreed Framework. It also claimed that Pyongyang had acknowledged that it had done so. Washington retaliated by nullifying the Agreed Framework and stopped provision of heavy-fuel oil and construction of the LWRs. The situation was further aggravated by the Bush administration’s distaste for North Korea and its leader, Kim Jong Il, as shown in explicit expressions such as “axis of evil” and “tyrant.”

North Korea reciprocated with the expulsion of IAEA inspectors from the Yongbyon complex in December 2002 and announced that it would withdraw from the NPT permanently. Pyongyang also restarted the five-megawatt reactor and began reprocessing spent fuel.

Amid increasing tensions, China began hosting six-party talks in August 2003, but it was not until the third round of the talks in June 2004, when the United States made its first concrete offer, that either Pyongyang or Washington appeared to treat them as a serious forum to hash out differences. Prior to that point, the United States attempted to use the talks to exert multilateral pressure on Pyongyang, while North Korea resisted any negotiations other than bilateral talks between itself and the United States. It was only after the second-term Bush administration decided to seriously pursue diplomacy in August that the six-party talks became a truly viable negotiating forum, with both sides showing give-and-take.
collapse and non-engagement policies and Seoul’s sunshine policy should be coordinated and converged into the more moderate position of negotiation.

It is crucial for Washington and Seoul, the two critical players with the strongest interests in denuclearization, to coordinate a way to maintain a joint position of negotiation even against domestic pressures to diverge in opposite directions. Past experience tells us that policy coordination between and within the governments becomes all the more important as divergences and disparities of policies usually result either in policy paralysis or inaction. Moreover, China, Japan, and Russia also tend to stick to the position of negotiation.

Four Reasons for Optimism
Assuming that the major players are able to learn from experience and stick to a policy of negotiation, there are some grounds for believing that the chances for success are significantly greater than in the past. Most notably, there are some new phenomena and trends that will hopefully help to increase the chances of a complete resolution of the nuclear issue. The following four factors stand out.

The Benefits of a Multilateral Approach
The six-party talks have become an effective tool to keep all the participants in the process. The six-party process also will provide an effective implementation guarantee mechanism once the implementation stage begins. All participants to the talks will be witnesses to and guarantors of the agreements. If one party tries to renege on its obligations, it has to confront criticism from the other five. In the 1990s, when North Korea failed to implement either the Denuclearization Declaration or the Agreed Framework, Washington and Seoul alone could not mobilize any effective punitive measures against Pyongyang other than verbal reprimands. In the six-party process, although punitive measures might still be limited, numbers do count. Parties that traditionally support North Korea, such as China and Russia, would be obliged to join the United States and South Korea in taking joint action against Pyongyang.

The binding and restraining power of the six-party process, however, goes both ways. Although the United States started the six-party talks to mobilize multilateral pressure against North Korea, it turns out that the United States itself is also subject of common culture and ideologies in the region. For the first time at the government level in the region, all six states agreed to “explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation.”

Once multilateralism begins to function, it is not easy to break away unless one is ready to take all the blame. It is an effective mechanism to constrain and bind the behavior of the participants.

China’s Role
Second, China is playing an effective role as the mediator as well as the host of the six-party talks. Because the United States and North Korea do not trust each other, it becomes crucial to have a respected mediator. At the beginning of the first round of the six-party talks in August 2003, China initially only served as host, but increasingly and successfully, it has developed its role as a mediator. China’s active role in the six-party talks also coincides with China’s interest in being perceived as a responsible leader in Northeast Asia working toward regional stability and denuclearization and not a regional hegemon.

Pyongyang’s External Dependence
Thirdly, North Korea has become more dependent on assistance from and trade with the international community, including South Korea and China, for its survival. North Korea also has been undergoing significant socioeconomic reforms and opening since the 2000 inter-Korean summit. These economic changes and increasing dependence make North Korea more vulnerable to outside pressure than it was in the 1990s.

North Korea underwent a serious economic crisis in the 1990s when the Communist trade bloc collapsed. Worsening food
shortages finally caused mass starvation from 1995 to 1998, when drought and flood alternately swept through North Korea. Pressed to undertake economic reforms, North Korea, one of the most closed societies in the world, introduced elements of the market economy into its revised Socialist constitution in 1998 and through the July 1st Economic Management Improvement Measures in 2002. Its economy and industry, which reportedly run below 30 percent of capacity, cannot be sustained unless supported by foreign aid and cooperation. If North Korea keeps expanding its nuclear arsenal, however, both the international community and Seoul cannot indefinitely continue economic cooperation and assistance. Memories of its severe economic and food crises and dependence on the outside will be an added restraint to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

U.S. Policy Shifts

Most importantly, U.S. policy toward North Korea seems to have become more practical, with an emphasis on diplomacy and negotiations instead of containment and pressure. The negotiation strategy of the policy team led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill has proven effective. In fact, the United States has a higher chance of diplomatic success on the Korean peninsula than in any other trouble spot around the world.

Unfortunately, Bush lost four critical years during his first term, moving back and forth between the policies of collapse and non-engagement and failing to coordinate its North Korea policy with Seoul. In the meantime, North Korea restarted its nuclear activities and multiplied its weapons capability.

A New Package Deal

What might a deal look like that truly ended the North Korean nuclear crisis? A new formula would be comprehensive, phased, mutually beneficial, and multidimensional. It would likely require several implementation stages to foster trust that both Pyongyang and Washington will follow through on their commitments. Likewise, North Korea and its interlocutors would have to make reciprocal concessions. These agreements would have to include countries other than North Korea and the United States so as to aid implementation and ease Pyongyang’s security concerns. And to guarantee that all of the six parties view the situation similarly, clear and effective verification processes would be essential.

Moreover, permanent denuclearization will require progress and close coordination in five separate areas: dismantlement, security assurance and diplomatic normalization, economic aid, peace-regime building on the Korean peninsula, and Northeast Asia security cooperation.

For example, in a first stage Pyongyang might freeze all of its nuclear activities at Yongbyon, allow monitoring and pledge to refrain from long-range missile tests. The United States would offer tentative security guarantees. The United States and other countries would resume shipments of heavy fuel oil suspended in 2002 while South Korea would begin discussions with North Korea on conducting surveys and drawing up plans to provide electricity.

In a second stage, North Korea would begin to dismantle any nuclear weapons and nuclear fuel cycle programs and facilities. The United States would begin negotiations on normalizing relations and easing sanctions. And other countries would aid North Korea’s economic and agricultural development and help Pyongyang prepare to join the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

In a final stage, North Korea would complete dismantlement and resolve any outstanding nuclear issues. The United States and Japan would normalize relations and remove sanctions. And South Korea would begin providing North Korea with electricity. At this point, the United States and other countries might also again consider providing North Korea with light-water reactors when its nonproliferation bona fides have been proved.

Given new diplomatic realities and a renewed willingness to denuclearize the peninsula, such an outcome is feasible. But the United States will need to make further diplomatic efforts and exercise further strategic flexibility. If it does so, it will be able to count on strong regional support both for the six-party talks and for the ultimate goals of dismantling Pyongyang’s nuclear programs. **ACT**