IV. North Korea’s nuclear programme

SHANNON N. KILE

During 2011 the Six-Party Talks on the nuclear programme of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) remained blocked by disagreement over the terms for restarting negotiations.1 North Korea repeatedly stated its willingness to return to the talks but emphasized that it would not accept any preconditions for doing so.2 South Korean and US officials insisted that North Korea must first halt its uranium-enrichment programme and impose a moratorium on nuclear weapon and missile tests before negotiations could resume. North Korea rejected this demand in separate meetings held in July 2011 with South Korea’s chief nuclear negotiator, Wi Sung-lac, and with the special US envoy on North Korean affairs, Glyn Davies.3 However, on 24 August, after a meeting between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, North Korea reportedly indicated that it would be willing to observe a moratorium on the production and testing of nuclear weapons and missiles in the context of resumed talks.4

On 17 December 2011 there were unconfirmed media reports that North Korea had agreed to suspend its uranium-enrichment programme in exchange for food aid from the United States.5 US officials had previously denied that there was any linkage between the issue of food aid deliveries to North Korea and progress in bilateral discussions of nuclear issues.6 The planned US announcement of the decision to resume food aid reportedly had to be postponed, however, following the announcement on 19 December of the death of Kim Jong-il.7 As the year ended, the uncertainties created by Kim’s death appeared to halt, at least for the time being, further North Korean–US talks.

During the year there were renewed questions and concerns about the scope of North Korea’s nuclear programme and its possible connection...
with the A. Q. Khan network. These had to do with the previously undeclared centrifuge enrichment plant, located at the Yongbyon nuclear site, that North Korea had shown to a visiting US scientific delegation in November 2010. North Korea claimed that the purpose of the enrichment plant was to produce low-enriched uranium for use as fuel in two light-water power reactors. A leaked report prepared by the United Nations Security Council’s panel of experts on North Korea said that the enrichment plant and reactor projects constituted serious violations of the sanctions imposed by the Security Council on North Korea after its 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests.⁸

There was an emerging consensus among experts that the enrichment plant revealed in 2010 had been built with assistance from the Khan network. A report on North Korea issued in September 2011 by the IAEA Director General, Yukiya Amano, noted that the design and physical characteristics of the plant’s centrifuge cascade were ‘broadly consistent with a design’ that had been disseminated through the network.⁹ It also stated that ‘information available to the agency’ indicated that North Korea had attempted to procure material and equipment suitable for use in an enrichment programme from a wide range of suppliers. According to the UN panel’s leaked report, in the 1990s the Khan network had supplied North Korea with a ‘starter kit’ of centrifuges that included first-generation (P-1) and second-generation (P-2) centrifuges based on Pakistani designs.¹⁰

There was also evidence to support speculation that North Korea had covertly transferred to other states material, equipment and technology of relevance for the development of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. The IAEA report concluded that uranium hexafluoride found in a cylinder shipped to Libya by the Khan network in 2001 was ‘very likely’ to have originated in North Korea.¹¹ The UN panel concluded that North Korea had routinely shared prohibited ‘ballistic missile-related items’ with Iran in breach of UN sanctions on North Korea.¹² The transfers were believed to have taken place on regular scheduled flights ‘through a neighboring third country’, which several UN diplomats identified as China.¹³

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¹² Panel of experts established pursuant to Resolution 1874 (note 8), p. 40.