



## North Korea's "Freeze" Offers Hope for Progress

*Marcus Noland says the decision by North Korea to freeze uranium enrichment and take other steps reflects a changed atmosphere in Pyongyang.*

*Transcript of interview recorded February 29, 2012. © Peterson Institute for International Economics.*

Steve Weisman: On February 29, North Korea took the world by surprise and announced that it was suspending uranium enrichment and taking some other steps, apparently negotiated with the United States. Marcus Noland, Deputy Director of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, what did the North Koreans do and how is the United States responding?

Marcus Noland: The North Koreans have agreed to suspend activities at their principal nuclear site, which is a town called Yongbyon, where there are several reactors, enrichment processing facilities, and so on. They have also agreed to a moratorium on nuclear testing and a moratorium on long range missile tests. These are all good things.

The nuclear aspect of it basically gets us back to 2005 when they first made this commitment. It does not cover the entire North Korea nuclear program. They essentially have two programs: one based on plutonium, one based on highly-enriched uranium [HEU]. There is an enrichment facility at Yongbyon covered under this agreement, but the assumption is that the HEU program is based on a number of facilities dispersed around the country in unknown locations. So, the agreement is modest, it is positive; it does not end the North Korean nuclear program.

Steve Weisman: The HEU program is more advanced than plutonium?

Marcus Noland: It's not more advanced, but it has the capacity for generating nuclear weapons at a more rapid rate once it gets going. So it is not as far advanced as the plutonium program, but ultimately is a more threatening program.

Now, in return, the United States has agreed to provide the North Koreans with 240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance. The number here, 240,000 metric tons, is important. There were negotiations back at the end of December about resumption of the humanitarian aid program. This was indeed the weekend in which Kim Jong-il apparently died. The two sides agreed on monitoring protocols, but they differed on the magnitude of the program. The United States said that they had done an assessment and 240,000 metric tons was the appropriate level. The North Koreans argued that they should get 330,000 metric tons because that was the magnitude of aid that had not been distributed when a previous program had been suspended in 2008.

The fact that they have compromised—or in fact, made a concession and accepted the American level of 240,000 metric tons—is politically significant. It means that somebody in Pyongyang is capable of making political decisions that go beyond Kim Jong-il's last instructions. And indeed, not only are they capable of making political decisions, but the decision they've made is a conciliatory or even a concessionary decision and not a

belligerent one, not one to hold back and then do another nuclear test. The deal reached today does not end the North Korean nuclear program, but it is process and it sets the stage for resumption of six-party talks and potentially agreements down the road that really would end the North Korean nuclear program.

Steve Weisman: Who is making the decision -- the young, new, untested leader Kim Jong-un?

Marcus Noland: We don't know. It could be Kim Jong-un. It could be a collective. It could be his uncle, the apparent regent, Jang Song-thaek. It could be somebody else. We don't know, but we do know from this action that somebody is in charge. Somebody or some group of people is capable of making a political decision, and indeed, this is a decision that actually involves a concession. So somebody is in charge.

Steve Weisman: Can we also assume that there is a felt need to get this food aid?

Marcus Noland: The food situation in North Korea is bad and it appears to be deteriorating. So there is real need. That said, this is a thoroughly ruthless government. So the idea that some poor North Koreans would starve I don't think was the entire motivation behind this concession. But the fact that they are under economic sanctions, the economy is not doing real well, and the food situation is deteriorating, presumably played some role in this decision.

Steve Weisman: Finally, what should the United States, Japan, and South Korea do to capitalize on this and perhaps reenergize the negotiating process?

Marcus Noland: As I said, the bilateral agreement between the United States and North Korea sets the stage for resumption of the six-party talks [North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, the U.S.]. Getting there is going to involve some additional activity. The South Koreans still have problems with the North Koreans. The South Koreans have asked for an apology for the North Koreans' sinking of a South Korean naval vessel and for the North Korean shelling of a South Korean island. They might not get an explicit public apology, but there has to be some kind of a deal between the North and South Koreans.

And in the case of the Japanese, they have the perennial problem of the abduction of their citizens by the North Koreans, which has been a stumbling block. But having achieved some progress on the core nuclear issues, one would think that this would set the stage for resumptions for six-party talks. Now one has to ask, what would happen in the six-party talks? I remain skeptical that the North Koreans would ever completely bargain away their nuclear weapons program. That's really the only card they have. But through the six-party talks process, it might be possible to get a further agreement that would build on this one and further constrain the North Korean nuclear program.

Steve Weisman: Thank you, Marc.

Marcus Noland: My pleasure.

