

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

North Korea's Role in Building a Nuclear Reactor in Syria

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Q1: How credible is the evidence that North Korea was aiding Syria in building a reactor?

A1: Until the evidence presented to Congress is released, it will be hard to assess how credible the information is. Reports suggest that there is video and supporting evidence that show ethnic Koreans working at a site that closely resembles the North Korean nuclear reactor in terms of layout and design. Key questions to be asked, however, include how the U.S. intelligence community can determine where the reactor is located, the national origin of the people working on the reactor, and when the video and other evidence was produced. Events leading up to the war in Iraq have demonstrated how assumptions made about intelligence information and its meaning can have dangerous results.

Q2: What effect will the more public presentation of this evidence have on the negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program?

A2: It is far from clear why the administration has chosen now as the time to release information it has had for many months. Regardless of the motive, it is clear that the six-party negotiation efforts with North Korea have reached a sensitive juncture, and that the novel arrangements apparently worked out by the lead U.S. negotiator, Assistant Secretary Chris Hill, have been met with skepticism both on the Hill and in policy circles. Convincing evidence that North Korea has helped Syria develop a nuclear reactor that could produce weapons-level plutonium will only add to concern that the agreement being negotiated be both comprehensive and verifiable.

Of the three key issues in the six-party talks—(1) eliminating North Korea's stocks of plutonium and nuclear weapons, (2) identifying and eliminating North Korea's reported uranium enrichment program, and (3) obtaining a complete accounting of past proliferation activities—the third issue is arguably less of an immediate security concern for the United States. It is possible that by demonstrating that the United States already has sufficient evidence about the North Korea–Syria link, the administration will be under less pressure to obtain North Korea's declaration on this issue and can focus on the issue of North Korea's plutonium and enrichment efforts.

Q3: What does the evidence that North Korea was helping Syria mean for efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons?

A3: If the evidence presented by the intelligence community proves credible, it could be used to further demonstrate the importance of ending North Korea's nuclear program. Left unconstrained, North Korea is capable of disseminating nuclear technology to other states. If, however, the United States and North Korea can negotiate a binding, verifiable agreement to end Pyongyang's nuclear efforts and a pledge not to share information with other states, then the risk that states such as Syria will be able to acquire sensitive nuclear technology will be reduced.

Q4: How close was Syria to building a nuclear weapon?

A4: If the evidence proves Syria was building a nuclear reactor with North Korea's help, the remaining evidence suggests that Syria was nowhere near the point of being able to operate a nuclear reactor. It took North Korea almost 10 years to design, build, and begin operation of its nuclear plants in Yongbyon. Moreover, it is not known where Syria would find enough uranium to fuel a reactor or the facility to extract any plutonium produced there. Also, if Syria was building a nuclear reactor, the United States has yet to release any information that Syria was actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

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