



Stanford's Straub, Hecker explain North Korea's plan to halt nuclear program

By [Sarah L. Bhatia](#) and [Beth Duff-Brown](#)

North Korea's agreement to curb its nuclear and weapons programs is welcome diplomatic news. But it stops far short of addressing the world's concerns about the isolated and unstable dictatorship.

Stanford experts [David Straub](#) and [Siegfried S. Hecker](#) discuss Pyongyang's deal with Washington that will allow nuclear inspectors into North Korea and deliver much-needed nutritional assistance to the impoverished country.

Straub is the associate director of the Korean Studies Program at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. He is a former State Department senior foreign service officer who worked for more than 12 years on Korean affairs. He travelled to North Korea in 2009 with former President Bill Clinton as part of a delegation to secure the release of two journalists from Current TV.

Hecker is co-director of the Center for International Security and Cooperation and a senior fellow at FSI. Hecker has visited North Korea four times since 2004. During his last trip in 2010, he was shown a new light-water reactor at the Yongbyon nuclear center and a uranium enrichment facility.

What are some of the key factors that led North Korea to agree to this deal?

Straub: This year marks the 100th anniversary of North Korean founder Kim Il Sung's birth, which the entire country will be celebrating April 15. The government has also said that this is

the target year for North Korea to become a “strong and prosperous country.” Kim Jong Un is a brand-new leader, and presumably he and his advisors want to show that he is capable of feeding his people and at least managing the relationship with the United States.

How do you assess the agreement? Where does the moratorium put relations between the U.S. and North Korea?

Hecker: The moratorium demonstrates that North Korea is once again interested in diplomacy with the United States. The fact that they are willing to halt the nuclear operations at Yongbyon, especially the uranium enrichment activities, is a big step in the right direction. I believe the U.S. now wants to achieve a permanent halt to all nuclear weapons activities in North Korea, then roll them back, and eventually achieve complete, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Straub: There is no perfect deal when it comes to North Korea, but overall I think it is worth giving this one a chance. It will probably slow down the pace of nuclear and missile development in North Korea. In addition, it will give us time to explore whether there is any prospect that the new leadership in North Korea may be willing to take a different, more positive approach toward the United States and South Korea than its predecessors. If history is a guide, the likeliest outcome is that after a period of several months to a few years the six-party talks will again break down, after which North Korea will create a new crisis.

How hopeful are you that this will lead to the capping of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and perhaps even its ultimate denuclearization?

Hecker: My advice to our government since November 2010, when I was shown the Yongbyon centrifuge facility, was to take immediate action so that the nuclear situation does not get worse. I advocated three no's: no more bombs, no better bombs and no exports. The current agreement will limit the number of bombs because the Yongbyon nuclear facilities will observe a moratorium. We are still not certain of what they can produce at an undisclosed site, but I believe it is limited. The nuclear testing and missile launch moratorium will constrain the sophistication of their nuclear weapons. Denuclearization is important, but it remains a more distant goal.

Why does the United States call this “important, but limited progress”?

Straub: It is significant, in part, because since North Korea threw out international nuclear inspectors in 2009 there has been no outside monitoring of what is going on at the Yongbyon facility. But most of the things North Korea has agreed to could be reversed at will. Apart from the nuclear tests, the suspension of North Korean nuclear activities applies only to Yongbyon. Dr. Hecker and other experts have concluded there is no way North Korea could have constructed its uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon so soon after the departure of international inspectors if had not already had another facility elsewhere. The agreement also does not address a number of non-nuclear issues, such as North Korea's military attacks on South Korea in 2010. For there eventually to be lasting progress on the Korean Peninsula—including a resolution of the nuclear issue—there will have to be great improvement in relations between North and South Korea.

Based on what your 2010 visit to the Yongbyon nuclear facility, how much progress could they have made in terms of uranium enrichment?

Hecker: They told me they just brought up the centrifuge facility a week before we arrived in November 2010. They may have perfected the operations and produced some low enriched uranium feed material for the light-water reactor they are constructing (which is still at least a couple of years away from completion). It is also possible that they are still struggling to make the centrifuge facility work smoothly. It is very important to have the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors get into the facility to see what progress has been made and to get a measure of how sophisticated their operations are. The North, in my opinion, still has only four to eight primitive plutonium bombs. I don't believe they have the confidence to put a warhead small enough to fit on one of their missiles. We have little information on whether they have made highly enriched uranium or have tried to build a bomb fueled with highly enriched uranium.

What does this agreement say, if anything, about the new North Korean leadership?

Hecker: From what I know, this was pretty much the deal worked out the week before Kim Jong Il's death. I think it's a good sign; Kim Jong Un appears to be in control as indicated by the fact that he is able to offer up a similar deal even with his father gone.

Straub: This deal suggests that there is a great deal of continuity in North Korea's leadership. The substance of this agreement is actually quite consistent with North Korean policies and priorities over the last 20 years. While there is no evidence to suggest that Kim Jong Un will adopt major new policies, there is always at least the possibility he might eventually.

The deal includes the provision of 240,000 metric tons of "nutritional assistance" to North Korea. What does the country's food situation look like right now?

Straub: There is no doubt that many ordinary North Koreans are going hungry. The United States has termed this "nutritional assistance" to distinguish it from "food aid," because officials are concerned that the provisions of bulk grain – especially rice – might be siphoned off by the North Korean elite. The U.S. government had said earlier that nutritional assistance would not involve bulk grain, and that it would be targeted toward especially vulnerable groups, such as lactating mothers, children, and the elderly.