

Published on *Arms Control Association* (<http://www.armscontrol.org>)

[Arms Control Today](#) > [November 2002](#) > [North Korea Admits Secret Nuclear Weapons Program](#) > North Korea Admits Secret Nuclear Weapons Program

---

## North Korea Admits Secret Nuclear Weapons Program

<!--#include virtual="/linked/head.inc"-->

### Paul Kerr

North Korea revealed that it has a clandestine nuclear weapons program during an early October meeting with a high-ranking U.S. official. The admission, which the United States made public October 16, indicates that Pyongyang has violated several key nonproliferation agreements, raising concern worldwide.

North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Suk Ju admitted that Pyongyang has a uranium-enrichment program during October 3-5 meetings with a U.S. delegation after Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly confronted him with intelligence data proving the program's existence, Kelly stated during an October 19 press conference in Seoul.

The intelligence included evidence that Pyongyang was purchasing material for use in a gas centrifuge program that could enrich uranium for use in nuclear weapons, according to Bush administration officials. Various press reports have cited Russia, China, and Pakistan as potential suppliers. All three governments have denied any role.

The status of the program is unclear. Kelly said during the Seoul press conference that the enrichment program is "several years old," but Bush administration officials have reported to Congress and allies that North Korea's program still appears to be in its "early stages" and would take a relatively long time to produce enough weapons-grade material for a nuclear device. It is unclear how much time that is.

Kelly stated that North Korea's nuclear program violates "its commitments" under several international agreements: the [Agreed Framework](#), the nuclear [Nonproliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#), Pyongyang's safeguards agreement with the [International Atomic Energy Agency \(IAEA\)](#), and the Joint North-South Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The United States and North Korea concluded the Agreed Framework in October 1994, ending a standoff resulting from the IAEA's discovery that Pyongyang was diverting plutonium from its graphite-moderated nuclear reactors for use in nuclear weapons. The Agreed Framework requires North Korea to "freeze its graphite-moderated reactors and related facilities," thereby ending its plutonium-based nuclear weapons program.

In exchange for shutting down its reactors, the United States agreed to provide North Korea with two proliferation-resistant light-water reactors (LWR), to create an international consortium called the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to build them, and to provide shipments of heavy fuel oil in the interim. The first reactor was originally scheduled to be completed by 2003, but construction has fallen behind schedule, and the reactor is not expected to be finished before 2008, barring further delays.

The Agreed Framework requires North Korea to accept full IAEA safeguards when "a significant portion of the LWR project is completed"—a milestone that is approximately three years away. Under those safeguards, Pyongyang must declare the existence of any nuclear facilities and allow the IAEA to inspect them.

The Agreed Framework does not specifically mention uranium-enrichment, a different method of obtaining fissile material for nuclear weapons, but it does require North Korea to remain a party to the NPT, under which non-nuclear-weapon states agree "not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive

devices.” The framework also says that North Korea “will consistently take steps to implement” the 1992 Joint Declaration, which states that “South and North Korea shall not possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities.”

The Agreed Framework has been controversial, with some Republicans, including President George W. Bush, questioning whether the United States can trust North Korea. The Bush administration refused last March to certify that North Korea was fully complying with the agreement, a congressionally mandated condition for KEDO to receive U.S. funding. Bush waived the certification requirement, however, allowing funding to continue. Then, in August the United States asked North Korea to allow immediate IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities, although they are not required by the Agreed Framework at this time.

Meanwhile, IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei said in September that the agency has not been able to verify that Pyongyang “has declared all the nuclear material that is subject to Agency safeguards.” U.S. intelligence estimates that North Korea separated enough plutonium for at least one, and possibly two, nuclear weapons before signing the Agreed Framework. Other spent fuel produced before the Agreed Framework is under IAEA safeguards, but if North Korea decided to reprocess it, the country could recover enough plutonium in six months for approximately six nuclear devices.

The current and future status of the Agreed Framework is unclear. Kelly said during the October 19 press conference that North Korean officials “declared that they considered the Agreed Framework to be nullified” when he met with them. Regarding the agreement, he added that “we haven’t made any decisions since we were informed it was nullified.” In an October 20 interview on ABC’s “This Week,” Secretary of State Colin Powell repeated that Pyongyang had declared the agreement “nullified,” but he would not say that it was “dead.” Powell explained that Washington had to consult with its allies before deciding on the framework’s future.

A North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman said October 25 that past U.S. actions had already invalidated the Agreed Framework, citing reactor construction delays, U.S. economic sanctions, and U.S. threats of pre-emptive attack against North Korea, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

The Agreed Framework requires the United States to “provide formal assurances to the DPRK [North Korea], against the threat or use of nuclear weapons.” Recent U.S. reports and statements have reportedly raised concerns in North Korea that the United States might consider a nuclear pre-emptive strike on the country, although the United States has not directly threatened North Korea. ([See ACT, October 2002.](#)) For example, a leaked version of the Bush administration’s January 2002 classified Nuclear Posture Review lists North Korea as a country against which the United States should be prepared to use nuclear weapons if necessary.

KEDO’s work continues despite North Korea’s admission, according to a KEDO spokesman, but it is unclear what decisions the United States, South Korea, Japan, and the European Atomic Energy Community—KEDO’s executive board members—will make in the near future. KEDO’s most recent shipment of fuel oil arrived in North Korea October 18, according to a State Department official interviewed October 30.

## **International Response**

President Bush, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung issued a joint statement October 26 during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico, saying that the uranium enrichment program violates Pyongyang’s nuclear agreements. The statement also calls upon Pyongyang to “dismantle” the program “in a prompt and verifiable manner and to come into full compliance with all its international commitments.”

The declaration stresses the three countries’ desires for a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue. The declaration also indicates that both Japan and South Korea intend to continue their bilateral engagement efforts with Pyongyang but that “North Korea’s relations with the international community...rest on...prompt and visible” dismantlement of its uranium-enrichment program.

On October 29 and 30, Japan and North Korea held normalization talks in Kuala Lumpur that covered a variety of issues, including North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, according to a Japanese Foreign Ministry statement. In the October 26 joint statement, Koizumi indicated that relations could not be normalized without resolution of Pyongyang’s missile and nuclear programs, but the talks ended without an agreement on the programs, according to an October 30 BBC report.

South Korea has also continued its engagement efforts with the North. The two governments held interministerial

talks October 19-22 in Pyongyang. According to a KCNA October 23 statement, the two sides agreed to “make joint efforts to ensure peace and security on the Korean Peninsula” and “to seek negotiated settlement of...the nuclear issue.” The next meeting is to be held in mid-January 2003, KCNA reported.

Meanwhile, Chinese President Jiang Zemin stated after an October 25 meeting with Bush in Texas that Beijing and Washington would “work together to ensure a peaceful resolution” to the North Korea nuclear problem, adding that China is a “supporter of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.”

Russia called for talks between Washington and Pyongyang and for both sides “to renounce the policy of mutual threats and military pressure,” emphasizing the importance of adherence to the NPT and “implementation” of the Agreed Framework “by all concerned parties,” according to an October 25 statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry.

### **What Next?**

Pyongyang has proposed that the United States conclude a nonaggression treaty with North Korea in order to resolve the dispute. An October 27 KCNA statement says that Washington should negotiate such a treaty, which would include a guarantee that the United States will not use nuclear weapons against North Korea, “if the U.S. truly wants the settlement of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula.” North Korea “will be ready to clear the U.S. of its security concerns” if the United States does so, according to the statement.

North Korea also proposed further engagement with the United States to discuss its nuclear program during the October 3-5 meeting. When asked during the Seoul press conference if, in exchange for discussions about ending the enrichment program, Pyongyang had requested U.S. diplomatic recognition and guarantees that the United States would not attack North Korea, Kelly stated that North Korea had suggested “measures...generally along those lines” but that North Korea must dismantle the program before any discussions could take place.

Powell stated at an October 26 press conference during the APEC meeting that Washington has “no plans...for a meeting” with North Korea and that the United States would not negotiate for the dismantlement of the uranium enrichment program. He added that the “international community” agreed that applying “political” and “diplomatic” pressure on Pyongyang was the best course of action, but he did not elaborate.

Powell also stated that “we have no intention of invading North Korea or taking hostile action against North Korea”—a promise Bush made earlier this year in Seoul. Powell also restated Washington’s policy of requiring discussions about missile development and proliferation, nuclear issues, human rights abuses, and North Korea’s conventional forces in order for negotiations to begin. Kelly also articulated this position during the meeting in Pyongyang, Powell said.

Pyongyang’s admission occurred against a backdrop of what appeared to be increased engagement between North Korea and the United States. Kelly is the highest-level U.S. official to visit Pyongyang since Secretary of State Madeleine Albright did so in October 2000. The United States had also sent Jack Pritchard, State Department special envoy for negotiations with North Korea, to the August 7 KEDO ceremony in North Korea marking the pouring of the concrete foundation for the first LWR that the United States agreed to provide under the Agreed Framework. ([See ACT, September 2002.](#)) And North Korea had pledged to indefinitely extend its moratorium on testing long-range missiles—a top U.S. security concern. ([See ACT, October 2002.](#))

The Bush administration’s decision to seek a peaceful resolution with North Korea contrasts with its position on Iraq, where it has threatened to use military force to overthrow the government in Baghdad because of its weapons of mass destruction programs.

<!--#include virtual="/linked/foot.inc"-->

[Arms Control Today](#)   [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty](#)   [North Korea](#)   [Nuclear Nonproliferation](#)

The Arms Control Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization. If you find our resources useful, please consider joining or making a contribution. *Arms Control Today* encourages reprint of its articles with permission of the Editor.

© 1997-2009 Arms Control Association  
1313 L St., NW, Ste. 130  
Washington, DC 20005

Tel: (202) 463-8270 | Fax: (202) 463-8273

The Arms Control Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization.  
If you find our resources useful, please consider joining or making a contribution.  
*Arms Control Today* encourages reprint of its articles with permission of the Editor.

© 1997-2011 Arms Control Association  
1313 L St., NW, Ste. 130  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: (202) 463-8270 | Fax: (202) 463-8273

---

**Source URL:** [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002\\_11/nkoreanov02](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_11/nkoreanov02)