Can you briefly recap the core provisions of the agreement between the United States and North Korea?
The U.S. announced on February 29th that North Korea has agreed to implement a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities at Yongbyon, including uranium enrichment activities. North Korea has also agreed to the return of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to verify and monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment activities. The United States, in return, has promised to provide 240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance for the starving North Korean population. But there are some inconsistencies between the U.S. State Department announcement and that from the North Korean state media, the Korean Central News Agency. Whereas Washington did not mention any prospects of next steps toward denuclearization, the DPRK foreign ministry official emphasized future steps would include the U.S. provision of light water reactors, by which North Korea hopes to resolve their chronic energy shortage, once the six-party talks are resumed.

Why did Washington agree to resume food aid toward North Korea, a country that has constantly pursued nuclear and long-range missile programs?
The simplest answer is because the U.S. government admitted there is a ‘legitimate humanitarian need’ in North Korea. The U.S government promised in 2008 to provide North Korea 500,000 tons of food on humanitarian grounds but this program ended suddenly in March 2009 as a result of the dispute over the monitoring of the distribution. The amount of food that was waiting to be delivered was 330,000 tons. The food situation has been deteriorating over the past years according the NGO groups that undertook an in-country assessment last year, although there is a gap between their conclusion and the official position of the State Department. Today’s agreement therefore can be understood as the resumption of the 2009 food aid commitment. However, more significantly, since the U.S. government later linked the resumption of aid to the North’s promise to at least temporarily stop its nuclear activities, the resumption of aid, called ‘nutritional assistance’, means the specific preconditions were met by North Korea’s commitment.

Does it signal a change of the Obama administration's dealing with North Korea?
It is not yet clear whether the U.S. has made a fundamental change towards North Korea. But one way to understand this agreement is as part of the Obama administration’s new emphasis on the Asia-Pacific, in part as a response to China’s growing influence in the region. China began to play a proactive role in the denuclearization process of North Korea almost 9 years ago when it hosted six-party talks in Beijing. And China’s involvement as a
important actor in North Korean issues has been growing explicitly and implicitly, particularly because of its increased economic relations with North Korea, although it is still likely that any agreement on denuclearization will still be made first through the direct diplomacy between Pyongyang and Washington. Under this situation, it is conceivable for the Obama’s North Korea team reached a conclusion that its ‘strategic patience’ policy ended up resulting in allowing Pyongyang to buy more time to develop its nuclear program while the UN sanctions on North Korea seemed derailed mainly by China’s unflinching economic support. On the other hand, it wouldn’t be surprising if skeptics of negotiation accuse the Obama administration’s agreement with Pyongyang of returning to the ‘appeasement’ approach which had been pursued under the Clinton presidency in the 1990s. However, it is also important to note that the current agreement was concluded within the boundaries of the ‘September 19th 2005 Declaration’ led by the Bush administration, as was explicitly noted in yesterday’s announcement.

What does an agreement tell us about the foreign policy stance of Kim Jong Un, North Korea’s new supreme leader who recently succeeded Kim Jong Il?
Pyongyang agreed to come back to this halted dialogue table surprisingly quickly. This move is clearly at odds with the general expectation that Pyongyang’s immediate concern would be internal control rather than foreign policy. American representatives had already held meetings with North Korean negotiators twice last year to hammer out this formula, and the two parties had nearly arrived at an agreement in December 2011, when the deal was stalled because North Korean leader Kim Jong II died of a heart attack. It is premature to speculate whether the North Korean leadership feels it has regained psychological and political stability at this point, but what is certain is they are showing a greater durability and consistency in terms of their policies than many western observers had anticipated. At the same time, it is worth noting that Pyongyang has utilized bilateral agreements with Washington as a source of domestic propaganda to claim diplomatic triumphs. So it will be interesting to see how the North Korean new leadership makes full use of what this agreement means for the purpose of controlling its society and population.

What is the prospect for the more further denuclearization negotiations with the DPRK?
The State Department defines the three rounds of talks that led to today’s announcement as ‘exploratory’. The purpose of the commitments made is also designed ‘to improve the atmosphere for dialogue’. This is all very cautious rhetoric on the part of the U.S. So we don’t know yet what kind of next steps may occur except for working level dialogue to finalize the details of the nutritional assistance delivery. But a variety of exchange programs agreed, such as culture and sports area, unambiguously shows the U.S. willingness to further its collaboration through non-governmental channels. More importantly, this agreement could jump-start the six-party talks, which have been in hiatus since 2008. However, we need to recall that, whenever the six-party talks became deadlocked, the key to unlocking the door was generally an intensive pattern of US-DPRK direct negotiations outside of the official six-party talks. In this sense, it is likely that today’s progress could accelerate the six-party process by giving the relevant parties a green light, subject to the Washington-led coordination with Japan and South Korea.

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