

US backflip over North Korean nuclear programs

By Peter Symonds
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The latest round of six-nation talks on North Korea's nuclear programs in Beijing last week produced what amounts to a diplomatic about-face by the Bush administration. After adamantly declaring for more than a year that it would not negotiate with Pyongyang or bow to "blackmail", Washington put a series of proposals on the table offering North Korea economic and political incentives to dismantle its nuclear capability.

The shift is, in all likelihood, only temporary—an indication that the White House wants North Korea off the agenda in the lead-up to the US presidential elections. It nevertheless underscores the duplicitous nature of the US administration's aggressive stance towards Pyongyang, which was branded by Bush in early 2002 as part of an "axis of evil", along with Iraq and Iran.

Last December, as the US was preparing to take part in the second round of six-nation talks, Vice President Cheney effectively vetoed State Department plans to make an offer to Pyongyang to resolve the dispute. He ruled out any concessions prior to North Korea establishing the "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement"—since referred to by the acronym "CVID"—of all its nuclear programs.

Cheney's stance, supported by the most right-wing sections of the Bush administration, amounted to a provocative ultimatum to Pyongyang, backed by thinly veiled threats of military action. In comments leaked to the media, Cheney was quoted as saying: "I have been charged by the president with making sure that none of the tyrannies in the world are negotiated with. We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it."

Last week, however, US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly told the media: "We are prepared for a serious discussion and we have a proposal to offer." While the plan has not officially been made public, its main provisions have been leaked to the press.

Over a three-month period, North Korea would be

required to meet a number of conditions, including: providing full details of its weapons systems; granting US access to, and allowing monitoring of, its nuclear facilities; and disabling some of its more dangerous weapons systems. In return, Pyongyang would receive supplies of heavy fuel oil from South Korea and other countries as well as a "provisional" US guarantee not to attack the country.

The US would also start reviewing North Korea's longer-term energy needs and the lifting of US economic sanctions that have been in place for more than half a century since the Korean War. After the initial period, Washington would provide a more permanent security assurance, as Pyongyang dismantled all nuclear weapons programs.

The North Korean regime has insisted all along that it was prepared to freeze its nuclear programs in return for a non-aggression agreement with Washington, which would include diplomatic relations and the lifting of economic sanctions, and economic assistance, particularly in the generation of electricity. North Korea is a small, impoverished country, which teetered on the brink of economic ruin throughout the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union—its main economic benefactor—and a series of natural disasters.

In 1994, confronted with the threat of military attack, Pyongyang signed a deal, known as the Agreed Framework, with the Clinton administration to shut down its nuclear programs in return for supplies of heavy fuel oil, the construction of two light water power reactors and the normalisation of relations with the US. Right-wing sections of the Republican Party bitterly criticised the deal as giving in to blackmail and effectively put it on hold when Bush was installed in office in 2001.

The Bush administration used an alleged admission by North Korea in October 2002 that it had a secret uranium enrichment program to halt the provision of heavy fuel

supplies and scuttle the Agreed Framework. Pyongyang angrily responded by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelling international nuclear inspectors and restarting its nuclear facilities. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq, North Korea justifiably concluded that any attempts to appease Washington would only invite a more aggressive US response, including possible military attack.

Washington has consistently ruled out bilateral talks with North Korea, which only agreed to multilateral negotiations after strong pressure from China. The Bush administration calculated that it could use the six-nation gathering to back Pyongyang into a corner and compel it to capitulate completely to US demands. But previous rounds of talks in Beijing have ended in acrimony, with North Korea responding to US ultimatums by hinting that it had already built nuclear weapons.

In substance, the US offer is no different from its previous stance. Washington is demanding that Pyongyang go far further than the terms of the Agreed Framework and dismantle, not simply freeze, its nuclear facilities. Moreover, it has already indicated that it will not revive plans for the light water reactors—construction never began even though they were due to be completed in 2003. But the latest round of talks is the first time the Bush administration has dropped its “CVID” ultimatum and concretely offered North Korea anything in return for the full dismantling of its nuclear facilities.

Washington’s shift on North Korea is bound up with the calamity confronting the US occupation of Iraq, which has opened up deep divisions in US ruling circles and provoked bitter infighting within the Bush administration itself. A confrontation with North Korea has the potential to rapidly spiral out of control, with disastrous consequences in the region and internationally—a situation that the Bush administration is seeking to avoid, for the time being at least.

Opinion in Washington is by no means unanimous, however. Even as US officials in Beijing attempted to put on a conciliatory face, news leaked out to the international media that, in the course of a private meeting, North Korea had issued a threat to conduct a “nuclear test” if the US did not accede to its demands. Such uncorroborated leaks from the US camp have taken place before, and have been used to demonstrate North Korea’s “irresponsible” and “untrustworthy” character.

What was extraordinary in this case, however, was that within a day the US State Department issued a formal statement denying the content of the leak. Spokesman

Adam Ereli emphasised that the “threat” was nothing new. “We have heard these comments before. It was not phrased or given as an ultimatum, but rather, on the contrary, I think we came away from this discussion... with the firm view that the North Koreans are going to give our proposal very serious consideration.”

The “threat” had more to do with political warfare in the Bush administration than any new step taken by Pyongyang. As an article on the *Asia Times* website noted: “The dispatch originated from Washington, not from Beijing, which suggests that the report’s source probably lies with the hawks, and specifically with the office of Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton. The fact that it would leak the report at this moment appears calculated to wreck the current meeting and return to the status quo ante.”

The State Department statement effectively defused the issue. Following the end of the meeting, the mood was upbeat, with all parties declaring the talks to be “constructive”. Desperate to revive its decaying economy, North Korea made a significant concession to the US last Friday, saying that it was prepared to “show flexibility” and may be willing to dismantle some of its nuclear facilities in return for US assistance.

Nothing, however, has been resolved. Nor is it likely to be. For more than a decade, Washington has adopted a belligerent and aggressive attitude towards North Korea and used allegations about its weapons capability to maintain a diplomatic and economic blockade, with the aim of precipitating the political collapse of the Pyongyang regime. The US has used the continuing crisis to cut across the economic plans of its European and Japanese rivals on the Korean Peninsula, and as a means of asserting its dominance within North East Asia.

Washington’s tactical backflip in Beijing last week will not alter the general thrust of this agenda.

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