

Visit by US envoy intensifies pressure on North Korea

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US presidential envoy William Perry last month headed the highest-level US delegation to North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Despite the reportedly cordial nature of the talks, hailed by both sides as “sincere and expressing mutual respect,” the aim of the visit was to intensify the pressure on the North Korean regime to meet US demands for the dismantling of the country's missile and nuclear programs.

Perry was carrying a personal letter from US President Bill Clinton to the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il outlining proposals for the ending of the longstanding US economic blockade of the country in return for guarantees that North Korea will end the development, production and export of long-range missiles. Washington has maintained a ban on virtually all trade, investment and travel and most communication with North Korea for nearly 50 years.

The Clinton administration has continued the blockade despite North Korea's disastrous famine, produced by successive floods and drought since 1995, and the progressive breakdown of the country's economic infrastructure over the last decade. North Korea was heavily dependent on the former Soviet Union for trade and economic assistance, including oil, spare parts and machinery.

Perry, a former US defence secretary, was appointed as a special envoy last year to conduct a comprehensive review of US policy towards North Korea. During his visit, he met with top North Korean leaders including Kim Yong Nam, chairman of the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, Kang Sok Ju, first vice-minister of Foreign Affairs, Defence Minister General Kim Il Chol and Chief of the General Staff General Kim Yong Chun, but failed to have talks with Kim Jong Il.

Few details of the discussions in the capital of Pyongyang have been released but it is clear that Perry's package was more in the nature of an ultimatum than an offer of better relations. Talks between South Korea and the US were due to take place in Hawaii on Monday to consider Pyongyang's “unresponsive” attitude to the US proposals. According to a

South Korean official quoted in the *Korean Herald*: “Concrete steps towards the North should be discussed at a tripartite consultation which will also involve Tokyo, later.”

A *New York Times* article on May 21 points to the fact that the purpose of Perry's visit was largely negative—to prove that the North Korean regime would not accept US demands without more aggressive threats. “In his few public comments while he has been putting together recommendations for a new policy, Perry has said that he thought it was important to ‘test the proposition that North Korea wants a more positive relationship’ with the United States, but be prepared to respond if it continues on its current path.”

Donald Gregg, a former CIA operative and US ambassador to South Korea, commented: “To be credible, this [Perry's] plan has to have a plan about how to deal with the North if they turn this down. For a while it looked like the recommendation would be benign neglect... It is clear that if we leave them alone, they go back to building nuclear weapons and missiles.”

The Republican right-wing in the US Congress has been even more critical of the Clinton administration's policy towards North Korea, pushing for an end to US economic aid as part of the “agreed framework” sealed in Geneva in 1994. The deal was only reached after Washington threatened to beef up its military presence in South Korea, claiming that North Korea was producing plutonium in its nuclear facilities for a weapons program. North Korea agreed to dismantle its Soviet-era nuclear reactors in return for two light water reactors and an interim supply of fuel oil, largely funded by Japan and South Korea.

Benjamin Gilman, Republican chairman of the US House of Representatives international relations committee, claimed that Perry's visit showed that the Clinton administration's policy was a failure. “At \$235 million a year North Korea had become our largest aid recipient in East Asia with very little reduction in the threat it poses to the US,” he said. Gilman has introduced a bill called the North Korea Reduction Act that would prohibit Clinton from

lifting the economic sanctions and make it difficult to provide any food aid.

The hysterical tone of the Congressional attacks on North Korea is illustrated in a speech by Gilman's fellow Republican Doug Bereuter, chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, delivered to the conservative Heritage Foundation in February. "As to North Korea, I remain convinced, as I was in 1995, that there is no more volatile and dangerous spot in Asia, and perhaps the world, than North Korea. The situation on the Korean Peninsula currently is fragile. As you know, the North maintains a huge, standing, million-man army, the bulk of which is forward-deployed within 75 miles of the DMZ. Its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities may threaten South Korea and Japan, and as demonstrated by Pyongyang's August '98 missile test, they potentially threaten even American soil—yes, the 48 states too."

Warning that "much hangs in the balance—potential war or peace on the Peninsula, large-scale proliferation or containment," Bereuter insisted that the United States must "thoroughly, dramatically, and energetically revise its security procedures—no failures to follow-through this time and no half-way, half-hearted efforts are accepted."

The Clinton administration earlier in the year demanded that North Korea provide access to US inspectors of a large underground excavation at the remote mountainous site of Kumchangri, spotted by US surveillance satellites. Without a shred of evidence, the US claimed that the site, 25 miles northwest of Yongbyon, a nuclear research centre, had the potential to house a nuclear weapons program.

The North Korean regime eventually permitted the US to examine the excavation. A team of 14 inspectors and scientific experts headed by Joel Wit, a US State Department official, examined the site at the end of May and found no preparations for the construction of a nuclear reactor. US State Department spokesman James Rubin was forced to concede: "The team found an unfinished site, the underground portion of which was an extensive, empty tunnel complex. A careful technical analysis of the team's work will now take place before further judgements can be made or reported."

But as the operations of the UNSCOM weapons inspection teams in Iraq demonstrate, the failure of the inspectors to find any evidence of a nuclear weapons program is likely to lead to further and more provocative demands by the US for the inspection of other "suspect" sites. Just as in the case of Iraq, the US is using economic sanctions, which are intensifying the social and economic crisis, to press ahead with its own aims in what is a key strategic area of the world, in close proximity to China, Russia and Japan.

The US strategy has the potential for a sharp rift with the

South Korean government of President Kim Dae Jung, who has been pressing ahead with his "sunshine policy" towards North Korea. Officials from South Korea and North Korea met in early June and agreed to hold regular vice minister-level discussions, with the first round slated for June 21 in Beijing. Similar talks broke down 14 months ago.

South Korea's Unification Minister Lim Dong Won proclaimed that the two countries, which are still technically at war, were "entering a new era of dialogue". South Korea has offered 200,000 tonnes of fertiliser to the North to assist its struggling farmers, but in return is calling for talks over the reunification of families separated by the war. An estimated 10 million people on the Korean peninsula have one or more family members on opposing sides of the border. Officials hinted that high level talks might take place later in the year.

The thrust of Kim Dae Jung's policy is, with the assistance of the Pyongyang Stalinists, to open up the country for South Korean investors to exploit the cheap labour and raw material of North Korea. Samsung, South Korea's second largest conglomerate, has followed the path opened up by its rival Hyundai and sent a delegation to North Korea to discuss possible investments. Under a plan announced last November, Samsung is expected to invest \$1 billion in the North to build a massive electronic complex to manufacture electronic goods and communication-related products, including mobile phones. If the project goes ahead, it will employ at least 30,000 workers.

Such investment projects will be directly threatened if the US begins to make belligerent, military threats against North Korea. With Japan, China and Russia as well as the US and South Korea, all seeking to push their own interests, the Korean peninsula is once again shaping up to be an arena of potentially explosive contention.



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