

North Korea seeks rapprochement with South and the US

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Amid the war preparations of the United States, South and North Korea held their first ministerial level meetings for six months from September 16 to 18. The talks were marked by the eagerness of North Korea to cement closer ties. After the chill in relations between the two Koreas for most of the year, South Korean Assistant Minister for Unification Rhee Bong Jo noted: "There was a complete change in the overall atmosphere." Agreements were reached to resume work on a number of stalled economic projects and to hold further meetings in October.

With obvious relief at the success of the meetings, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung told a press conference: "We have upheld peace and showed cooperation and exchanges on the Korean peninsula... at a time when the world is being drawn into war."

While the talks had been arranged before the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, there is no question that North Korea's response at the talks was spurred on by the US threats of war against any state declared to be supporting terrorism. North Korea is currently listed by the US as a "terrorist-supporting nation," due to its alleged involvement in the 1987 explosion aboard a Korea Air jet. In the 1990s, it was declared a "rogue-state" and the US has repeatedly sought to pressure Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile programs.

According to South Korean sources, the North's Foreign Ministry sent a private communication to the US within hours of the attacks to emphasise that Pyongyang was not involved. North Korea's notoriously slow-to-respond bureaucracy officially condemned the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon within a day. This week, North Korea indicated that it might even support US military actions against alleged terrorist targets.

North Korea's motives are not simply to forestall any potential US strike against it. The regime in Pyongyang sees a window of opportunity to alter its relations with the US and South Korea, which, since the installation of the

Bush administration, have grown increasingly strained.

In the 1990s, the North Korean economy all but collapsed due to the loss of subsidies previously provided by the former Soviet Union, combined with a series of devastating natural disasters. The country of 23 million is now dependent on international food aid to feed its population. As its political and economic isolation has intensified, North Korea has indicated its readiness to open up to capitalist investment, as China did over 20 years ago. The regime's main condition has been that its hold on power is not challenged.

Twelve months ago, it appeared that South Korea had accepted these terms. The Kim Dae-jung government, representing sections of Korean and global big business and encouraged by China in particular, has pursued a "sunshine policy" of reconciliation with the North. At last year's inter-Korea summit, when Kim met with the North's leader Kim Jong-Il, the two sides agreed to preserve the political division of Korea indefinitely while opening up the North economically. The Koreas agreed to reconnect rail and road links that have been severed since the 1950-53 Korean War and to construct a free trade zone industrial park in the city of Kaesong, near the border with the South.

If fully implemented, these projects would facilitate the exploitation of cheap labour and resources in both North Korea and China's north-eastern provinces and establish a new trade route between East Asia and Europe. The opening of the North would also enable the construction of gas and oil pipelines to South Korea from Russia's energy-rich Siberia. Over subsequent months there was a rush by South Korean and European business and diplomatic delegations to North Korea.

The Clinton administration also appeared to have broadly agreed with the outcome. One of the most significant features of the inter-Korea summit was the North's downplaying of its traditional demand for the US

to remove its military bases from South Korea—a key concern in Washington. In response to the North’s hint that it was prepared to accept the long-term presence of US military forces, Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeline Albright traveled to Pyongyang in December to initiate closer talks.

The installation of the Bush administration ended these moves, however. The Republican right, which forms a key constituency of Bush, has consistently advocated maintaining the Cold War military pressure and economic blockade against North Korea in order to bring about its unqualified submission or total collapse. Figures such as Bush’s Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage publicly denounced the Clinton administration’s Korea policy as one of “appeasement”.

As soon as it was installed in office, the Bush administration called off any talks with Pyongyang in order to conduct a protracted policy review. In retaliation, North Korea suspended the implementation of the inter-Korea summit agreements. In June, after ending its review, the US indicated it was willing to begin talks with North Korea but only if a gamut of new issues were put on the table, including the reduction of North Korea’s conventional military forces. Pyongyang rejected the offer, and to the consternation of the governments in both North and South Korea, no further proposal has been forthcoming from Washington.

At the beginning of this month, the North Korean regime faced an uncertain future. As well as a belligerent policy from Washington, opponents of the “sunshine policy” have been strengthened within South Korea. The North’s blunt rejection of talks, under conditions where South Korea has extended considerable financial and food aid to Pyongyang, was exploited by the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) to attack Kim Dae-jung’s overtures as a failure and a threat to the country’s security.

Throughout August, the rightwing GNP conducted a sustained campaign against Kim Dae-jung’s Unification Minister Lim Dong Won. Lim, a key government policy maker, authorised a South Korean delegation to take part in North Korean celebrations of Korean Independence Day. Scenes of South Koreans singing pro-North Korean songs were used to justify a vote of no-confidence in Lim in the National Assembly and demand his resignation.

North Korea’s unexpected call on September 2 for ministerial-level meetings between the two Koreas was largely a belated effort, conducted under pressure from China, to try and shore up Lim and the Kim Dae-jung government. On September 3, however, the United

Liberal Democrats (ULP), the small party in coalition with Kim Dae-jung’s Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), crossed the floor and supported the GNP against Lim.

The ULP subsequently abandoned the government and has formed an anti-government alliance with the GNP. The collapse of the coalition means Kim Dae-jung’s cabinet can no longer rely on the passage of legislation through the National Assembly. The opposition alliance has already declared that any further assistance by South Korea to the North will require parliamentary approval.

The North Korean regime is no doubt hoping that in the current international situation the Bush administration will soften its hard-line stance on Pyongyang, as it has shifted its policy toward other countries such as Iran and Pakistan.

There are hints this may be the case. Following the latest Korean talks, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said the US was ready to meet with Pyongyang “at any time and any place”. US Korean embassy spokesman Evans Revere told a forum in Seoul: “The terrorist attacks provide an opportunity for the DPRK (North Korea) to cooperate with the international community against terrorism.”

It is just as possible, however, that the “war against terrorism” could become the rationale for a bellicose US intervention into East Asia, with the Bush administration seizing upon any North Korean refusal to follow the type of US political *diktat* being levelled against the Taliban in Afghanistan.



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