

US rejects North Korean proposals for defusing confrontation

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5 May 2003

The Bush administration last week dismissed out-of-hand North Korean proposals to end months of tensions over the country's nuclear program. Washington's position sets the stage for a sharpening confrontation as US officials threaten to impose tough new economic sanctions on North Korea—a move that Pyongyang has declared it would consider an act of war.

The North Korean proposals were made at a three-way meeting with US and Chinese representatives in Beijing that began on April 23 and was scheduled to last three days. This was the first encounter between US and North Korean officials since last October, when, according to Washington, Pyongyang admitted to having a secret uranium enrichment program. Since then North Korea has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled international inspectors and restarted its experimental nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

The talks in Beijing broke up early amid US claims that North Korea admitted to having already built a number of nuclear weapons and to starting the reprocessing of spent fuel rods. North Korea has not publicly acknowledged possessing a nuclear arsenal and US intelligence has observed no signs that the reprocessing has begun. According to the *Washington Post*, the admission was made in a private exchange to a US official during a break in discussion.

Whether true or not, Washington used the alleged revelations to obscure an offer by North Korea to end its nuclear and missile program in return for security guarantees and economic assistance. Neither side has made the plan public, but details contained in media reports indicate that Pyongyang is simply asking for some of the measures contained in the 1994 Agreed Framework. Under that deal, North Korea mothballed its nuclear facilities in return for fuel oil shipments, the

construction of two lightwater reactors and the normalisation of relations with the US.

The Bush administration, however, has ruled out any return to the 1994 agreement, which has been bitterly criticised by the Republican rightwing since it was signed. As soon as Bush came to office, his administration immediately halted diplomatic moves towards normalising relations. The construction of the lightwater reactors had barely begun, when, following last October's meeting, the US effectively halted it, along with supplies of fuel oil.

Yet the constant refrain from the White House is that the US will not succumb to “blackmail” or “reward bad behaviour”. Washington's claims of “blackmail” are even more ludicrous when placed in the context of Bush's branding of North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” and open US military threats against the small, impoverished state. US officials went to the talks in Beijing not with any counter-proposals but with an ultimatum to Pyongyang to unconditionally dismantle its nuclear facilities.

In the wake of the meeting, US Secretary of State Colin Powell initially described the talks as “quite useful”. He acknowledged that North Korea had put forward proposals and said the US would study them. Within a matter of days, however, the Bush administration flatly rejected Pyongyang's plan. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer reiterated that the US would “not reward North Korea for bad behaviour” and the demand for the “irrevocable and verifiable dismantlement of its nuclear weapons program.”

The American press has emphasised differences in approach between the State Department and the so-called hawks in the Pentagon but the disagreements are of a completely tactical nature, related to the particular mixture of diplomatic bullying, economic sanctions and

military threats to be used. The Bush administration barely disguises the fact that its agenda is not simply the disarming of North Korea but the removal of the current regime headed by Kim Jong Il.

Just prior to the Beijing meeting, the Pentagon leaked details of a classified memorandum to the *New York Times* arguing that “regime change” through an economic blockade of North Korea should be official US policy. Last week US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice openly indicated that Kim Jong Il should go. “This is a terrible regime. It would obviously be better for world peace and peace in the region if there was a regime there that was less intent on trading in missiles, and running drugs and engaging in nuclear blackmail.”

While Rice added, “this is not a matter of invading North Korea,” the recent deployment of long-range US bombers and stealth aircraft within striking distance of North Korea, can only heighten fears in Pyongyang. Bush and his senior officials have repeated that all options remain on the table, including the military one.

In the wake of the US invasion of Iraq, North Korea can only conclude that, as part of the “axis of evil”, it is high on the list of priorities for Washington’s next war of aggression. The *World Socialist Web Site* gives no political support to the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang, which is a brutal and oppressive dictatorship that has nothing to do with socialism. Nevertheless, as a small, impoverished nation, North Korea has the right to arm itself, by any means available, against the growing US military threat.

Washington’s rejection of North Korea’s proposals produced an angry response in Pyongyang, which issued a statement declaring that the country would regard any imposition of economic sanctions or a blockade “as the green light to a war” and would “take self-defensive measures”. Highlighting the hypocrisy of the Bush administration, the statement pointed out:

“The Bush administration asserts that it is just for the US to mount pre-emptive attacks on other countries when it deems necessary and had already perpetrated them in Afghanistan and Iraq. Such a war group of the superpower openly listed the DPRK [North Korea] as part of an ‘axis of evil’ and a target of its pre-emptive nuclear attack.... How can the possession of means by such a small country as the DPRK for just self-defence alone be [a] ‘threat’ or ‘blackmail’. This is just like a

guilty party filing the suit first.”

The Bush administration is yet to announce its next steps against North Korea but its overall strategy is already clear: to isolate Pyongyang diplomatically and economically in order to intensify the Stalinist regime’s crisis and precipitate a political collapse. The main objective of US diplomacy is to overcome the reluctance of neighbouring countries—China, Japan and South Korea—to hasten an implosion in North Korea, the political and economic costs of which will be borne by them, not Washington.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the main outcome of the Beijing meeting is Pyongyang’s “admission” that it possesses nuclear weapons. Washington will undoubtedly exploit this disclosure to the hilt to increase the pressure on North Korea’s neighbours to accede to US demands for tougher economic and ultimately military measures, adding further fuel to an already explosive situation in North East Asia.



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