No agreement reached in Beijing over North Korea's nuclear program

Peter Symonds
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Multilateral talks in Beijing concerning the standoff between the US and North Korea over the latter's nuclear programs broke up last Friday with no agreement. Chinese officials tried to put a positive gloss on the meeting, indicating that all parties had agreed to avoid escalating tensions and to meet again in two months time. However, no formal communiqué was issued.

The following day, North Korea issued a statement declaring that it saw no purpose in further talks. Pyongyang warned that unless Washington shifted its hard-line position, North Korea would have no alternative "but to strengthen our nuclear deterrent force as a self-defensive means... Both sides are levelling their guns at each other. How can the DPRK [North Korea] trust the US and drop its gun?"

North Korean officials stated in the course of the three-day meeting that Pyongyang would proceed to build and test a nuclear device if Washington refused to provide it with security guarantees. North Korea has repeatedly offered to dismantle its nuclear programs in exchange for a formal non-aggression pact with the US—a demand that the Bush administration has in the past rejected as "blackmail".

The White House dismissed the possibility of a North Korean nuclear test, describing the gathering in Beijing as "a positive session". "North Korea has a long history of making inflammatory comments," a deputy spokeswoman told reporters in Texas. But while Washington and the international media focused on North Korea's so-called belligerence, it is clear that the US regarded the talks as a means to bully Pyongyang into accepting its demands.

From the outset, the Bush administration has insisted that any talks be multilateral, rather than bilateral as Pyongyang wanted. Washington prevailed upon China to pressure North Korea into agreeing to the six-party meeting in Beijing, which also included Japan, South Korea and Russia. The thinly disguised aim of such talks was to back North Korea into a corner and, at the same time, to garner support from the other countries for a comprehensive economic blockade of the small, impoverished state.

A North Korean foreign ministry spokesman described the negotiations as "not only useless but harmful in every aspect". "Betraying our expectation, the talks turned out to be no more than armchair arguments and degenerated into a stage show to force us to disarm," he said.

In the week prior to the Beijing talks, the US and Australia provocatively announced that joint military exercises in the south-west Pacific in September would include a rehearsal of techniques required for stopping and searching ships. The exercise is part of a US-sponsored plan known as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—an 11-nation grouping preparing to intercept ships and aircraft, including on the high seas and international airspace, to search for weapons and other "illicit cargo".

While the pretext for the PSI proposal is to stop the spread of so-called weapons of mass destruction, there is no doubt that North Korea is one of the chief US targets. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher emphasised to the media: "If North Korea wants to continue to aggressively proliferate missiles and related technologies, it might find itself affected by this initiative."

At a meeting in Brisbane in July, the 11 nations—US, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, Portugal and the Netherlands as well as Japan and Australia—agreed to support the move in principle despite the fact that military interdictions on the high seas or in international airspace are in open breach of international law. Already steps have been taken to implement stringent searches of North Korean ships when they enter other national waters or ports.

Just days before the Beijing talks were due to start, Japanese authorities in the northern port of Niigata detained a North Korean ferry for a day on "safety" grounds. The ferry—the only ship that operates between the two countries—has been the focus of lurid allegations in Japan and the US that it is used to smuggle everything from drugs to counterfeit cash and weapon parts. Teams of Japanese inspectors scoured the ship from top to bottom as well as checking the cargo and passengers, but found nothing. The vessel was allowed to leave after fixing several minor safety breaches.

The Beijing talks also coincided with other US military exercises in North East Asia. American troops were due to hold military drills based on computer-simulated war games in South Korea from August 18 to 29. The annual exercise is aimed at testing the readiness of US and South Korean forces to respond to any "emergency" on the Korean peninsula. The US

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was taking part in joint manoeuvres with Russian naval ships in the Bering Strait over the same period.

On the eve of the Beijing meeting, the State Department sent a pointed message to North Korea by releasing a letter by Secretary of State Colin Powell supporting a belligerent speech by Undersecretary of State John Bolton in July. Bolton, known for his rightwing, aggressive views, denounced North Korean leader Kim Jong Il as a "tyrannical rogue state leader" and described life in the Stalinist state as "a hellish nightmare". Bolton was not included in the US delegation to Beijing but Powell's letter backed his speech, declaring it "did not really break any new ground" and "as such, was official".

The US administration, which cut off humanitarian aid and maintains tight economic restrictions, is not concerned about the lack of democratic rights and appalling living conditions inside North Korea. As in the case of Iraq, Washington is exploiting the plight of the North Korean people to strengthen US dominance in the region. By including North Korea in an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran in his 2002 State of the Union speech, Bush effectively declared that "regime change" in Pyongyang was also on the US agenda. By publicly backing Bolton's views, Washington was effectively underscoring the point.

All of Washington's standover tactics appear to have fallen short, however. In the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang seems to have concluded, quite legitimately, that it has absolutely nothing to gain by bowing to US demands for unilateral disarmament. If the latest statements from Pyongyang are any indication, North Korea has decided that the only means of forestalling a similar fate to that of Iraq is to build, or threaten to build, nuclear weapons. Since January, North Korea has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Agreement, expelled international weapons inspectors and restarted its small nuclear research reactor at Yongbyon.

North Korea's tough stance in Beijing has exacerbated sharp divisions in Washington over policy towards Pyongyang. Several media reports yesterday indicate that the Bush administration may be on the point of adopting a softer approach—offering a series of economic and political concessions, including a security guarantee, in return for an agreement from North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program. In effect, it would mark a return to the so-called carrot-and-stick methods of the Clinton administration—an approach that was previously denounced by the Republican rightwing.

With US troops bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are clearly concerns about the prospect of becoming embroiled in a new, potentially even more explosive, crisis in North East Asia. An unnamed US official commented in the *Boston Globe*: "Now [the administration] has learned the hard way that the solution to this is going to be negotiation. The approach until now has been terribly inefficient and wasteful. We could have been here [in negotiations] two years ago."

There is, however, sharp opposition to any toning down of the Bush administration's aggressive policy towards Pyongyang. Last week, the Senate Republican Policy Committee issued a paper calling for a UN resolution to impose international sanctions against North Korea. It opposed negotiations with North Korea, stating that such a move would signal "to Iran, other rogue regimes, and would-be treaty violators that they can defy the international community and get away with it".

The US would no doubt seize on UN sanctions to justify its plans for a blockade of North Korea, including the interception of ships and planes. Among the most rightwing sections of the Bush administration, tough economic sanctions have been viewed as the means for crippling North Korea not simply to end to its nuclear programs but to force a "regime change" in Pyongyang. North Korea has already declared that it would regard any move by the UN to impose economic sanctions as an act of war. To date China and Russia have opposed such a step. But despite the potentially catastrophic consequences of a military confrontation in North East Asia, the most hawkish elements in Washington insist that such a course should be pursued.

An article entitled "A Deal with North Korea? Dream on" written by Nicholas Eberstadt, from the American Enterprise Institute, an influential rightwing thinktank, appeared in the *Washington Post* on the eve of the Beijing talks. He bluntly ruled out any deal over North Korea's nuclear program as "little more than diplomatic wishful thinking," declaring that "a fool-proof independent verification program would be barely distinguishable from outside military occupation".

Eberstadt concluded: "Any genuine progress toward a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear impasse cannot be expected without fundamental—even revolutionary—changes in outlook and policies on the part of North Korea's leadership. None of the options Washington and its allies face in North Korea is pleasant—but the time has come to face them squarely, without diplomatic illusion."

The outcome of the political wrangling in Washington is impossible to predict. It may be that the Bush administration will pursue a more cautious diplomatic approach, at least temporarily, as it attempts to deal with the quagmire it has created in Iraq. But it is certainly possible that the White House could launch a new reckless adventure in North East Asia, if for no other reason than to divert attention from the disastrous consequences of the most recent one in the Middle East.

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