

Washington scuttles six-nation talks over North Korean nuclear crisis

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Attempts to negotiate an end to the ongoing confrontation over North Korea's nuclear programs have effectively been scuttled by US Vice President Richard Cheney in a move that threatens to significantly raise tensions in North East Asia next year.

The long-delayed second round of six-party talks brokered by China were due to be held last week. The aim of the multilateral negotiations, which include the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, is to pressure Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear capacity. North Korea has made clear that it will only do so in return for a US non-aggression pact, as well as the lifting of economic sanctions and the provision of economic aid.

But the Bush administration has repeatedly ruled out any concessions to North Korea, branding them as "blackmail". The first round of talks broke up in August with no agreement. North Korea angrily denounced them as "a stage show to force us to disarm" and declared its intention to protect itself by strengthening "our nuclear deterrent force".

In October, the Bush administration appeared to moderate its position. During a tour of Asia, Bush hinted that while the US would not agree to a non-aggression pact, it may be prepared to offer other security guarantees to North Korea. Bush's comments were in part aimed at securing South Korean troops to bolster the US-led occupation of Iraq, which South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun had made contingent on a softer US stance towards North Korea.

Weeks of shuttle diplomacy by Beijing aimed at establishing a statement of principles acceptable to both Washington and Pyongyang abruptly collapsed just a week before talks were due to take place on December 17-19. The US blamed North Korea's intransigence, but the real reason lay in the sharp divisions within the Bush administration itself.

Last week, several media reports pointed to the role of the most right-wing sections of the Bush administration, led by Cheney, in vetoing a draft statement of principles prepared by Beijing. According to the *Washington Post*, senior US foreign policy officials met on December 12 and rejected the third draft of the document. At the meeting, Cheney insisted that the "irreversible" dismantling of North Korea's nuclear programs and "verification" had to be mentioned.

As Cheney was well aware, North Korea was highly unlikely to agree to such preconditions. Pyongyang has only agreed to freeze its nuclear programs not to dismantle its facilities, and has not accepted the highly intrusive "verification" regime that the US is

demanding. Moreover, North Korea has insisted that any ending of its nuclear programs takes place "simultaneously" with US security guarantees and economic measures. The US has only offered to provide assurances in the future.

But Cheney's most significant remarks were reported in Knight Ridder newspapers on December 19. Citing a senior US official, an article published by the news agency reported that Cheney had insisted on an uncompromising approach to any talks with North Korea. "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," he reportedly declared.

Cheney's alleged comment recalls Bush's declaration in 2002 branding North Korea, Iraq and Iran as an "axis of evil". The statement makes clear that, despite the quagmire confronting the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington has not shelved plans for new wars of aggression. As far as Cheney is concerned, the multinational talks on North Korea are simply a convenient platform for issuing ultimatums to Pyongyang and pressuring other nations to toe the US line.

Cheney's intervention cut directly across attempts by the US State Department to lay the basis for negotiations. A senior US official told the *Los Angeles Times* that the US had conducted "tens, maybe even hundreds, of hours of discussions with the Chinese" to work out a draft statement acceptable to both sides. The collapse of these diplomatic efforts indicates that the most militaristic elements of the Bush administration are calling the shots.

The Bush administration's aggressive stance on North Korea's nuclear programs is bound up with broader US interests. The small, impoverished state may not have huge reserves of oil but it is strategically located adjacent to China, Japan and Russia. By maintaining the Korean Peninsula in a constant state of tension, Washington is able to use its military predominance to dictate terms in North East Asia—to allies, rivals and enemies alike.

North Korea has faced more than a decade of unending demands from Washington over its so-called weapons of mass destruction. Faced with the threat of imminent US military attack in 1993, Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear facilities in return for the normalisation of diplomatic and economic relations, as well as the provision of fuel oil and the construction of two lightwater nuclear reactors to provide for its power requirements. The Agreed Framework, which was never fully implemented under Clinton, was effectively torn up when Bush came to office in 2001.

Not only did Bush include North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” but in March 2002, leaked portions of the Pentagon’s “Nuclear Posture Review,” revealing that the US was prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea. Following alleged admissions by North Korea in October 2002 that it had a secret uranium enrichment program, Washington cut off fuel oil supplies. Pyongyang responded by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelling international nuclear inspectors and restarting its nuclear facilities.

Having witnessed the fate of Iraq, North Korea has justifiably concluded that nothing it does will appease the US. While Bush has stated that the US does not intend to invade North Korea, he has also repeatedly declared that “all options are on the table”. Faced with a potential US military attack, Pyongyang appears to have decided that its only course of action is to build nuclear weapons, or at least make Washington believe that it is doing so.

It is clear to everyone that Pyongyang will not give up its one bargaining chip without security guarantees from the US in return. As a North Korean negotiator cited in the Knight Ridder article put it, Washington’s demands were the equivalent of “you... telling me to take off all my clothes and walk out into a snowstorm and you promise you will come running with a coat. I don’t think so. You want me to go naked into the night.”

Far from allaying North Korean fears, the Bush administration has taken a series of military steps aimed at intensifying the potential threat. Under the guise of preventing the spread of so-called weapons of mass destruction, the US has established a 16-nation coalition, known as the Proliferation Security Initiative, to intercept suspected ships and aircraft.

While not specifically named, there is no doubt that North Korea is a target. The next joint military exercise is due to take place in the Arabian Sea in January and the planned scenario is reportedly identical to the interception of a North Korean freighter, the *So San*, in December 2002. In that case, US warships were forced to release the ship and its cargo of Scud missiles when US ally Yemen declared it had bought the weapons legally.

The *So San* affair underscores the fact that preparations are being made under the Proliferation Security Initiative to intercept ships on the high seas and aircraft in international airspace in breach of international law. By targetting North Korea’s missile exports, Washington is deliberately seeking to heighten the country’s economic crisis by cutting off one of its few sources of foreign exchange.

The US has already curbed its limited food aid to North Korea. World Food Program (WFP) director James Morris warned last weekend that nearly four million North Koreans would be cut off desperately needed food rations unless foreign donors provided more aid. While Russia had given some assistance, the WFP aid was likely to run out by February. Washington grudgingly announced on Wednesday that it would supply another 60,000 tonnes of food, bringing its total for 2003 to 100,000 tonnes. The overall amount is still well down on the previous US annual average of 155,000 tonnes.

At the same time, the US is significantly strengthening its military presence in South Korea, where it maintains a force of 37,000 troops near the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) with North

Korea. According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 21, the Pentagon is deploying “an intimidating array of high-tech weaponry, much of it battle-tested in Iraq and Afghanistan” in South Korea.

US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz announced the plans in June when he visited South Korea. Some 14,000 US troops will be shifted away from the DMZ to bases further south. The move will serve two purposes. Firstly, in the event of any clash, the US military will be less vulnerable to any North Korean attack or reprisal. Secondly, the troops will be transformed into an expeditionary force for use elsewhere in the Pacific.

The US has pledged to Seoul that it will spend \$11 billion to introduce the latest armaments into South Korea. Details have not been announced but, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, the weaponry is likely to include more “smart bombs” and a new medium-weight armoured vehicle known as the Stryker. The US began to upgrade its Apache attack helicopters and Patriot anti-missile systems in June. In September, the first Shadow 200—a small unmanned reconnaissance aircraft that can be fitted with weapons—was deployed in South Korea.

The buildup provoked a sharp reaction in Pyongyang. The official Korean Central News Agency declared a fortnight ago: “These fresh military developments are indicative of the US scheme to escalate the military standoff on the Korean peninsula and extend the sphere of operations of the US troops in South Korea to the rest of North East Asia.”

The Pentagon’s military preparations in South Korea are in line with Cheney’s declaration that the US will not “negotiate with evil; we defeat it.” His comments underscore the fact that the underlying US policy in North Korea is the same as in Iraq—“regime change”, either by precipitating an internal economic and political collapse or through military confrontation.



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