

# Standoff continues over North Korea's nuclear programs

James Conachy  
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Despite various diplomatic efforts to restart six nation talks over North Korea's alleged nuclear weapons programs, no concrete date has been set. The Bush administration continues to reject a North Korean offer to freeze all aspects of its military and civilian nuclear projects in exchange for simultaneous US economic assistance and security guarantees. Instead, the White House has restated its ultimatum that the North dismantle its nuclear programs before the US offers anything in return.

The North Korean regime made public its "bold concessions" at the beginning of a visit to Pyongyang by an unofficial American delegation from January 6 to 10. On January 8, the delegation, which included the Bush administration's former special envoy to North Korea, Charles Pritchard, and Siegfried Hecker, a former director of the Los Alamos nuclear facility, was given a tour of the nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell initially welcomed the offer of a freeze as a "positive step" that "encouraged" him. Two days later, however, Powell backtracked and declared that North Korea must unilaterally disarm and submit to intrusive "verification" inspections before the US made any offers.

The North Korean foreign ministry responded on January 9 by declaring it was "as foolish as expecting a shower from clear sky" to expect Pyongyang to end its nuclear and other weapons programs, as Libya and Iran have agreed to do, without a simultaneous security guarantee from the US.

The diplomatic stalemate makes the resumption of talks between North Korea, South Korea, the US, Japan, China and Russia problematic. Washington has made clear it does not intend to offer any concessions. On January 13, following talks between Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly and a leading Chinese diplomat, the State Department told journalists the US would accept nothing less than "the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of North Korea's nuclear facilities.

The White House's hard-line stance provoked a bitter op-ed contribution to the January 21 *New York Times* by Charles Pritchard. According to Pritchard, the North Korean vice foreign minister Kim Gye Gwan told him that "time was not on the American side". The longer the US refused to make a deal with North Korea, Kim allegedly declared, "our nuclear deterrent continues to grow in quantity and quality".

Pritchard resigned as special envoy to North Korea last August, following the Bush administration's refusal to make any serious

attempt at negotiation. Lambasting the White House policy, Pritchard wrote: "At worst it is a failed attempt to lure American allies down a path that is not designed to resolve the crisis diplomatically, but to lead to the failure and ultimate isolation of North Korea in the hope that its government will collapse". Instead of bringing down the regime, Pritchard implied, the actions of the Bush administration have produced the very situation the US claimed it was seeking to prevent: North Korea amassing an arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Pritchard warned: "China, South Korea and Russia (and perhaps Japan) may well accept this status quo... And it is easy to see why this new status quo would appeal to them, given the instability that could result if the worst-case scenario of United States policy—which is to say, isolation, sanctions and possible military confrontation—comes to pass. The fragile multilateral coalition on which the United States is relying would dissolve."

The current standoff was triggered in October 2002, when the Bush administration claimed that Pyongyang had admitted in a closed-door meeting to be secretly operating a uranium enrichment program. The US exploited this alleged "admission" to renege on the 1994 Agreed Framework signed under the Clinton administration. Under that arrangement, North Korea agreed to close its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon in exchange for the provision of fuel oil and the construction of two light-water nuclear power plants.

Little improvement took place in US-North Korea relations under Clinton, in part due to constant attacks by the Republican right on the White House for appeasing Pyongyang. The installation of the Bush administration saw relations qualitatively deteriorate, particularly after North Korea was labeled part of an "axis of evil" in January 2002. Faced with the withdrawal of the US from the Agreed Framework and witnessing the steady build-up to the invasion of Iraq in late 2002, the North Korean regime appears to have concluded justifiably that nuclear weapons, or the threat of them, offered the only defence against US military aggression.

North Korean officials told the recent unofficial delegation that it had no uranium enrichment program in October 2002 and denied any of its officials had admitted to one. Following the US accusations, however, Pyongyang ordered International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors out of the country and announced it was withdrawing from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It then declared its intention to restart the Yongbyon

reactor and begin reprocessing 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods in order to produce plutonium. Experts estimate that reprocessing all the fuel rods would enable the production of 25 to 30 kilograms of plutonium, enough to build two to five nuclear devices.

On January 21, Siegfried Hecker, who took part in the delegation, testified to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the small five-megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and the facility's reprocessing plant were definitely functioning and—according to the North Koreans—had been since February 2003.

The North Koreans proved to Hecker that they had removed the spent nuclear fuel rods from the storage tanks that had been built under UN supervision following the signing of the Agreed Framework. He was informed the rods had been re-processed and was shown a jar containing a small piece of metal which the North Koreans claimed was weapons-grade plutonium. An official told him the next day that the North Koreans had “shown our deterrence”.

Hecker told the Senate committee that he “saw nothing and spoke to no-one who could convince me that they could build a nuclear device with that metal and that they could weaponise such a device into a delivery vehicle”. He said he told a senior North Korean official that what he had been shown was “just like somebody in an automobile company telling me that just because they've got steel, they know how to build an automobile”. US intelligence agencies have been asserting for some time that North Korea probably already possessed two nuclear devices.

Whatever the status of Pyongyang's nuclear programs, it is clear that an entire faction of the US establishment is agitating for a confrontation with North Korea. In reaction to the unofficial delegation's visit to Pyongyang, for example, the *Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed comment by right-wing columnist Claudia Rosett on January 14 in which she denounced as “plutonium patsies” those, like Pritchard, advocating a compromise with the North in order to secure its disarmament.

A new book, *An end to evil: How to win the war on terror*, co-authored by two of the principal ideologues of the extreme right in the US—Richard Perle and David Frum—spells out the agenda of aggressive action that the US should take towards North Korea, as well as Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya and other countries. Perle served as the chairman of Bush's Defence Policy Board until last April. Frum is a former special assistant to the first President Bush. Both are connected to the American Enterprise Institute, one of the leading thinktanks of American neo-conservatism.

*An end to evil* calls for even more provocative demands on North Korea, including the unilateral handover of all nuclear material, the closure of missile bases and a stringent IAEA inspection regime that permits the removal of scientists and other citizens to third countries for interrogation. North Korea, they declare, must surrender all of its known nuclear material before it “receives a single dollar in new American aid: not a phased surrender, not an incremental surrender, but a total and complete surrender”.

The authors openly admit that it is “unlikely that North Korea will accept such terms”. In such an eventuality, they advocate a series of military steps, starting with a total sea, air and land blockade on the North, that would set the region on the path to a

catastrophic war. The book calls on the US to redeploy US troops in South Korea away from the border to lessen the possibility of American casualties in a North Korean attack and to have ready “detailed plans for a preemptive strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities”.

As in the case of Iraq, the allegations against North Korea are a crude attempt to cover up the real US motives for its bellicose stance towards Pyongyang. The theme that runs through all of the book's foreign policy proposals is one of ensuring US global military and political dominance. North Korea has become a de-facto battleground for geo-political influence in north-east Asia. Washington has repeatedly exploited tensions with Pyongyang to undermine the ambitions of China, South Korea, Russia, Japan and the European powers to economically develop the Korean peninsula.

There is little doubt that many of the book's views are shared by Vice President Dick Cheney and other Bush administration figures, including Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. In fact, the White House has already ordered the Pentagon to make some of the military preparations outlined by Perle and Frum.

The US Navy is training with the navies of 16 other countries for a naval blockade. US air power in the western Pacific is being increased, with bombers and fighters reportedly being deployed to the American base on Guam. A US Army brigade that only recently returned from Iraq is currently undergoing training in California explicitly based on a scenario of conflict on the Korean peninsula. The US struck an agreement with South Korea last week to begin repositioning the 37,000 US troops in the country to bases well to the south of the North Korean border and out of range of its artillery.

As the US military preparations continue, the Bush administration's diplomatic efforts over the coming weeks are likely to centre on pressuring South Korea, Japan, China and Russia to line-up with the US ultimatum to North Korea: surrender or face the consequences.



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