

Six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program in deadlock

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Six-party negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program broke up last weekend without any resolution or official communiqué. In order to avoid a complete collapse of the round, the parties—the US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas—agreed to resume discussions in the week beginning August 29.

After protracted talks in Beijing lasting 13 days, the gulf between the US and North Korea remained as deep as at the start. Washington demands that Pyongyang dismantle all nuclear programs—including those for peaceful purposes—before it will agree to any economic and political concessions. North Korea insists that its right to civilian nuclear power reactors be part of any final agreement.

In the course of the negotiations, Beijing, as the host, drew up four drafts of a basic statement of agreed principles, which included the de-nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the US and North Korea. The latter proviso is part of longstanding North Korean demands for an end to the US diplomatic and economic embargo, dating back half a century to the Korean War.

Top US envoy Christopher Hill described the draft statement in glowing terms. “This package would virtually solve their energy problems. It would address many of their economic problems. It would address normalisation with the international community, including bilateral normalisation. It's very generous package,” he declared.

In the lead up to the talks, South Korea offered to provide the North with extensive aid. The package, dubbed the North Korean Marshall Plan, would provide at least \$US1.4 billion in infrastructure and an additional \$1 billion annually, beginning in 2008, in the form of 2,000 megawatts of power.

There is no doubt that North Korea is under pressure to accede. Having been economically and politically isolated by Washington, the country is in deep economic crisis and faces severe shortages of energy and basic goods, including food. Pyongyang's only formal ally, China, is pushing it to accept the US deal, as a means of preventing a nuclear arms race in the region and to curry favour with Washington.

To agree to the package, however, would leave North Korea completely dependent on foreign energy supplies and vulnerable to future US threats and provocations. In 2002, US President George Bush branded North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as an “axis of evil”, and a leaked Pentagon report identified North Korea as a US nuclear target.

Three previous rounds of talks, which began in 2003, broke up in acrimony. At the last round in June 2004, the US placed a similar package on the table. In February, Pyongyang claimed for the first time that it had “manufactured nukes for self-defence” and was suspending any involvement in talks indefinitely. Since then, Washington, with the assistance of Beijing in particular, has pressured North Korea, including with the threat of action by the UN Security Council, to return to talks.

The US made a significant shift in its formal approach to the latest talks. In the past, it has refused to engage in bilateral discussions, insisting on multilateral talks in order to enlist the other four countries in forcing North Korea to bow to US demands. Right-wing Republicans in the US condemned the previous Clinton administration for negotiating the 1994 Agreed Framework with Pyongyang to freeze its nuclear programs. The Bush administration declared repeatedly that it would not bow to “blackmail” or “reward bad behaviour” by North Korea.

Before the latest round, the White House shelved its ritual denunciations of Pyongyang and its leader Kim Jong Il. In Beijing, lengthy direct discussions took place between the US and North Korean negotiating teams and the round itself was a marathon compared to the previous three. At the conclusion, US envoy Hill emphasised that further talks at the end of the month could produce a breakthrough.

The change in tone does not represent an abandonment of Washington's aggressive attitude toward North Korea, but rather is purely tactical. In alliance with the so-called EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany), the Bush administration has this week provoked a sharp confrontation with Iran over its nuclear programs. In these conditions, it appears that Washington wants to put North Korea on the backburner, at

least for the short-term.

The marked difference in the current US stance toward Iran and North Korea underscores the hypocritical and self-serving character of Washington's arguments.

North Korea quit the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2002 after the US provocatively accused it of having a secret uranium enrichment program and halted fuel oil supplies provided under the 1994 Agreed Framework. Pyongyang has since expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, restarted its small research reactor and claims to have reprocessed spent fuel rods and built nuclear weapons. Yet, Washington has dismissed these claims as mere rhetoric and is currently negotiating with Pyongyang.

Iran, on the other hand, remains covered by the NPT and insists that its nuclear programs relate to plans for a nuclear power industry. While insisting on its right under the NPT to develop uranium enrichment, Tehran has bowed to US and European demands for more and more intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities. Without any evidence, Washington routinely declares that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons. In response to Iran's decision this week to restart uranium conversion at its Esfahan plant, the US is demanding that Iran be referred to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

The obvious contradictions in the Bush administration's attitude to the two countries simply underscores the fact its policies are determined solely by US strategic and economic interests. Both the Middle East and North East Asia are key elements of US aims to establish dominance over its rivals. If Washington is giving Iran a higher priority at present, it is in large part because of the military disaster it confronts in Iraq. At the very least, the US is seeking to bully Iran, and indirectly other regional countries, into playing a greater role in crushing the growing insurgency in Iraq against the illegal US-led occupation of the country.

The two-faced character of US policy toward both Iran and North Korea is further highlighted by the fact that Washington takes an entirely different approach to other countries that have either refused to sign the NPT, such as US allies Israel and India, or have breached its provisions. Last year South Korea, for instance, was forced to admit that it had conducted secret uranium enrichment experiments, as recently as 2000, yet the matter was swept under the carpet without even a hint of condemnation, let alone UN sanctions.

If Iran and North Korea have been singled out for special treatment, it is because the US regards them as potential military targets and wants to ensure they are incapable of offering any resistance.

Whether or not the outline of a deal is agreed when the six-

party talks resume later this month remains to be seen. The US claimed to have the agreement of all countries except North Korea to the final draft statement of principles. US envoy Hill blamed Pyongyang for blocking agreement by insisting on its right to build civilian power reactors.

This week, however, signs of open disagreement between the US and its ally South Korea emerged. South Korea's Unification Minister Chung Dong-young indicated on Thursday that his country would oppose the US demand that North Korea ends all nuclear programs. "We believe that the North has the right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, such as for agriculture and medical use and for generating electricity," he said.

The South Korean government is deeply concerned that another breakdown of talks and a diplomatic crisis will cut directly across its so-called Sunshine Policy to open up North Korea as a source of cheap labour and a transit route to China, Russia and beyond. While opposed to North Korea acquiring nuclear weapons, Seoul fears that US bellicosity has the potential to provoke military conflict on the peninsula.

On the day before Chung's statement, US envoy Hill definitively ruled out allowing North Korea to build nuclear power reactors, declaring it is "simply not on the table". The following day, US officials dismissed the possibility of a rift with South Korea. Chung's comments make clear, however, that the outcome of American efforts to browbeat not only North Korea, but other parties to the negotiations, is by no means certain.

If the round of talks does break up without any agreement, tensions are likely to escalate as the Bush administration seeks to take punitive action against North Korea.



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