

The Bush administration backtracks on North Korea

Peter Symonds
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Despite Washington's efforts to dress up the outcome as a win, the six-party agreement on North Korea's nuclear program reached in Beijing on Monday is a significant backdown by the Bush administration. Embroiled in a deepening quagmire in Iraq and a political crisis at home over Hurricane Katrina, the White House has sought to take North Korea off the agenda, temporarily at least, by agreeing to a general statement of principles that previously it would have emphatically rejected.

The fact that US negotiators even held extended bilateral discussions with their North Korean counterparts during six-party talks last month marked a shift. For the past three years, Washington has refused to speak directly to Pyongyang, declared that the US would not be "blackmailed" into "rewarding bad behaviour" and repeatedly stated that "all options are on the table"—that is, including military ones.

Prior to the recommencement of the latest round of talks last week, top US negotiator Christopher Hill ruled out any discussion on North Korea's demand for a light-water nuclear reactor to replace its existing nuclear programs. The US wanted Pyongyang to "get out of the nuclear business", Hill declared, adding that any international energy aid to North Korea would take the form of "conventional power".

On Sunday, however, as the talks were heading for a breakdown, the Bush administration gave way and accepted an agreement drawn up by China that "respected" North Korea's "right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy". The document agreed to by all parties also "agreed to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of [a] light-water reactor to the DPRK [North Korea]".

According to the *New York Times*, Beijing, having pressured North Korea to accept the deal, presented the US with an ultimatum: "Here's the text, and we're not going to change it, and we suggest that you don't walk away." The article explained: "Had he [Bush] decided to let the deal fall through, participants in the talks from several countries said, China was prepared to blame the United States for missing a chance to bring a diplomatic end to the confrontation."

The agreement itself is heavily weighted against North Korea, which "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning at an early date to the treaty on the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) and to IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards." Pyongyang quit the NPT, expelled IAEA inspectors and restarted its nuclear facilities in 2002, after the Bush administration effectively abrogated the 1994 Agreed Framework between the two countries, claiming that North Korea had admitted to having a secret uranium enrichment program.

The joint agreement released on Monday commits Washington to very little. Along with a statement that it "has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK", the US agreed with North Korea "to take steps to normalise their relations". The document included vague promises of "economic cooperation in the fields of energy, trade and investment, bilaterally and/or multilaterally". The only concrete proposal was a reaffirmation of South Korea's pledge to provide two megawatts of power to help North Korea overcome its chronic electricity shortages.

Nevertheless the agreement was undoubtedly a bitter pill for the Bush administration to swallow. As a number of commentators have pointed out, if the deal were actually concretised and put into effect, it would not be greatly different from the Clinton administration's Agreed Framework that was the target of virulent denunciation in the 1990s by right-wing Republicans. In 1994, Clinton stepped back from a full-scale military attack on North Korea and signed the Agreed Framework that froze Pyongyang's nuclear facilities in return for supplies of fuel oil and promises to build two light-water reactors and normalise diplomatic relations.

As an article in *BusinessWeek* entitled "Bush Dusts Off Bill's Pyongyang Playbook" pointed out: "Bush & Co also derided a 2000 communiqué in which the Clinton administration pledged not attack the North—but this new accord includes the same promise". Having been installed in office in 2001, the Bush administration froze relations with

North Korea and belligerently declared in 2002 that it was part of “an axis of evil” along with Iraq and Iran.

Significantly, some of the right-wing US advocates of “regime change” in Pyongyang have backed this week’s agreement. An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday even claimed that the deal was something of a diplomatic victory. After quoting Bush’s comment that the agreement was “a wonderful step forward” as long as it can be verified, the newspaper declared approvingly: “But if that does happen, it will be a triumph for US policy, removing a nasty threat to the security of the US and its allies.”

Just three years ago, the *Wall Street Journal* enthusiastically backed the Bush administration’s decision to confront North Korea over its alleged uranium enrichment program and effectively tear up the Clinton administration’s Agreed Framework. To highlight its message then, the newspaper republished a 1994 editorial denouncing the Agreed Framework that pointedly declared: “In the end, the only certain non-proliferation policy towards nasty, closed regimes such as North Korea’s is to change the government.”

No one should believe that either the Bush administration or its backers like the *Wall Street Journal* have undergone any fundamental change of heart. Like the non-existent weapons of mass destruction that were used as the pretext to subjugate Iraq, the White House is cynically exploiting the issue of nuclear non-proliferation as the means for advancing US economic and strategic interests in key areas of the globe. In the case of North Korea, the US has constantly heightened tensions as a means of disrupting the plans of its rivals, including the EU, South Korea, Japan, China and Russia, to open up North Korea as a cheap labour platform and to use the Korean peninsula as a key transport corridor.

The completely unprincipled character of the Bush administration’s foreign policy is underscored by the glaring contradictions between its stance on North Korea and Iran. Pyongyang has quit the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and claims to have manufactured nuclear weapons. Yet the US has sat down to talks with North Korea and conceded that it has the right to “peaceful uses of nuclear energy”. Iran, on the other hand, is an NPT signatory, has opened up its facilities to intrusive inspection and insists that its nuclear programs are purely for civilian purposes. But Washington has refused to take part in negotiations with Tehran, demands that Iran cannot exercise its right under the NPT treaty to enrich uranium and, along with Britain, Germany and France, is pressing for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council for punitive sanctions.

The utter hypocrisy of Washington’s position is further highlighted by its own failure to abide by the NPT and its

refusal to insist that its close allies abide by the same strictures as Iran and North Korea. Under the terms of the treaty, nuclear powers like the US were to reduce and eventually dismantle their nuclear arsenals. The Bush administration has not only maintained the massive US nuclear stockpile but is developing a new range of nuclear weapons to augment it. While demanding that North Korea rejoin the NPT and that Iran dismantle its uranium enrichment program, Washington is winding back its limited sanctions against India and Pakistan over their 1998 nuclear tests. Moreover, it has no intention of pressuring these allies, or Israel, to sign the NPT and do away with their nuclear weaponry.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the agreement signed on Monday is a matter of pure expediency. While the US will undoubtedly exploit every available means to strong-arm North Korea into implementing it to the letter, Washington has no intention of being tied to by its terms. As soon as the joint statement was made public, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the media that the US would not even discuss a light-water reactor until North Korea had dismantled all its nuclear programs. These comments clearly breach the spirit if not the letter of the agreement, which states that its terms will be implemented “in a phased manner in line with the principle of ‘commitment for commitment, action for action’.”

Not surprisingly, Pyongyang reacted angrily. The North Korean foreign ministry declared: “The US should not even dream of the issue of [North Korea’s] disarmament of its nuclear deterrent before providing light-water reactors, a physical guarantee for confidence building.” While Rice declared dismissively that the US “will not get hung up” on the North Korean statement, the exchange highlights the tenuous nature of the deal. Just as it invaded Iraq on the basis of lies and is currently using unsubstantiated allegations to threaten Iran with economic sanctions, the Bush administration is quite capable of concocting a pretext for tearing up this week’s agreement and returning to a reckless policy of provocation and military threats against North Korea.



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