

Six-party talks on North Korean nuclear program reach dead end

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Six-party talks in Beijing on North Korea's nuclear programs broke up on December 22 without any progress or any firm proposal to reconvene. The latest round of negotiations, which involved the US, China, North Korea, South Korea, Russia and Japan, were the first since late 2005 and ended in deadlock after the US refused to budge on North Korea's demand to lift financial sanctions.

In September 2005, North Korea agreed to a joint statement of principles for resolving the protracted standoff over its nuclear programs. But it refused to attend further six-party talks after the US pressured the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA) to freeze North Korean funds. While Washington claimed that the financial ban was not linked to the nuclear talks, North Korea regarded it as an obvious sign of bad faith aimed at further crippling its isolated, backward economy.

With talks stalled, North Korea upped the ante, firstly by conducting a missile test in July, then by testing its first nuclear device in October. The Bush administration immediately seized on the nuclear test to push through a UN Security Council resolution imposing a series of bans on North Korea, including the interception of its vessels on the high seas. North Korea only agreed to return to the six-party talks this month under pressure from China, which is keen to prevent a further US escalation of the crisis.

US officials hinted that they were seeking to make progress in the talks. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice indicated that the US could reconsider some of the financial sanctions. According to South Korea's Yonhap newsagency, US chief negotiator Christopher Hill met with his North Korean counterpart and offered a series of incentives if Pyongyang were willing to shut down its small nuclear research reactor. But no compromise was reached.

Hill, who had travelled to Beijing five times since October to prepare for the talks, blamed the North Korean

delegation for the breakdown. "One day it's financial issues, another day it's something they want but can't have, another day it's something we said about them that hurt their feelings," he declared. North Korea's chief negotiator Kim Kye-gwan countered by warning: "The US is using a tactic of both dialogue and pressure, carrots and sticks. We are responding with dialogue and a shield, and by a shield we are saying we will further improve our deterrent."

While the US offer has not been made public, there is no doubt it was an unequal arrangement in which North Korea was compelled to give up its only bargaining chip—its nuclear programs—in return for vague US promises. The US administration's attitude to Pyongyang was summed up in President Bush's declaration in 2002 that North Korea was part of an "axis of evil". He has never renounced the desire for "regime change" in Pyongyang.

The joint agreement signed in September 2005 committed North Korea to abandoning all its nuclear weapons and programs under International Atomic Energy Agency supervision. Washington, however, gave little in return, simply declaring that it had "no intention to attack or invade" North Korea and offering to "take steps" to normalise relations between the two countries.

The failure of the current round of talks is a product of several factors. There is no doubt that North Korea remains reluctant to agree to an unequal deal which offers nothing concrete in the way of economic relief or ending the US blockade of the country that has lasted since the end of the Korean War in 1953. For its part, Washington has no interest in making any concessions to North Korea except on terms that will ensure its continued dominance in the region.

The Bush administration has relied heavily on China to pressure North Korea to the negotiating table and to sign last year's joint agreement. In the final analysis, the

failure of the US to get what it wanted at the six-party talks is a reflection of its weakened position. When China initiated the six-party talks in 2003, the US had just invaded Iraq and was threatening similar preemptive strikes against other countries, including North Korea, Syria and Iran. Three years later, the US is bogged down in a deepening quagmire in Iraq that has generated mass opposition at home and undermined its capacity to launch new military adventures.

China has attempted to walk a fine line in negotiations, by proving itself useful to Washington on the one hand, while not completely alienating its formal ally North Korea on the other. Beijing wants an end to the crisis, which cuts across its own attempts to play a more significant role in the region. As a result it has been prepared to use its economic relations with North Korea as a lever. At the same time, however, China does not want a political collapse in Pyongyang that would open up the possibility of a new hostile regime on its borders.

China responded angrily to North Korea's nuclear test in October, which not only undermined Beijing's efforts to defuse the crisis but opened up the possibility that rival Japan would construct its own nuclear weapons. China supported the US-backed UN resolution against North Korea, but has been reluctant to accede to US demands for the interception and search of all North Korean ships.

South Korea, while a formal US ally, has refused to take part in what is tantamount to a US-led blockade of North Korean shipping. US belligerence has undermined the efforts of South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun to pursue the so-called "Sunshine policy" of easing tensions on the Korean peninsula and opening up North Korea as a cheap labour platform for investors.

Russia is also opposed to a more aggressive stance toward North Korea. Russian negotiator Sergei Razov declared that Moscow's policy was to prevent any "further escalation of tensions" in a region next door to the Russian Far East. Russia has previously floated the idea of extending rail and pipeline links through North Korea as a means of more closely integrating the region economically.

Only Japan has openly backed US demands for tough action against North Korea as a means of aggressively establishing its own dominant role in the region. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party responded to the failure of the six-party talks by proposing tough new sanctions against North Korea—a move that the Japanese government later put on hold.

Following last week's deadlock, it is by no means clear

that there will be a further round of talks. Yesterday, the US ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow urged North Korea to take concrete steps to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. But he offered nothing in return, simply repeating the terms of the 2005 agreement that the US was willing to normalise relations with Pyongyang.

Pyongyang has declared that it now should be regarded as a "responsible nuclear power". Following the talks, the state media hailed North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il for his "iron-like pluck and grit" in standing up to the US, warning that the country would now improve its "nuclear deterrent". This reckless and rather desperate posturing has nothing to do with any genuine struggle against imperialism, but is aimed at striking a better bargain with the US.

The Bush administration has previously declared that all options are on the table—that is, including a preemptive military attack on North Korea. The White House, however, is preparing to boost the number of US troops in Iraq in a bid to shore up its military occupation. At the same time, it is preoccupied in dealing with Iran, which has also refused to bow to US demands. Last Saturday, after months of delays, the UN Security Council finally passed a resolution imposing sanctions on Iran unless it shuts down its nuclear programs. The resolution was much watered down at the insistence of Russia and China—another indication of Washington's weakened position.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that a US military strike on Iran or North Korea is ruled out. Failure to achieve its ends through diplomatic means may well drive the Bush administration into reckless new military actions in its final two years in office.



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