

Talks over North Korea's nuclear programs fail to make any progress

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A second round of six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear programs ended in Beijing on July 20 without any agreement on the next steps to be taken in implementing the broad deal reached in February. While the Bush administration is pushing Pyongyang to rapidly disable all of its nuclear facilities, North Korea is demanding economic assistance and, above all, the normalisation of relations with Washington, including a security guarantee.

The tortured nature of negotiations, which involve China, Japan, Russia and South Korea as well as the US and North Korea, was revealed in the drawn-out process in implementing the first phase of the February agreement. Three months after the April 14 deadline, North Korea shut down its small research reactor at Yongbyon and associated facilities and in return received the first shipment of 50,000 tonnes of fuel oil. The main reason for the delay was Washington's failure to transfer \$25 million in North Korean funds previously frozen in a Macau-based bank. On July 18, as talks resumed in Beijing, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors verified the shutdown.

Unlike the first phase of the February agreement, the second phase remains vague, with no worked-out details or deadlines. The US proposed a "work plan" for North Korea to disable its nuclear facilities and provide a full declaration of its nuclear programs by the end of 2007. North Korea rejected the proposal, indicating implementation had to be on the basis of "action for action". Although the talks were extended for a day, no agreement was reached. The official communiqué issued by China only reiterated the deal reached in February that North Korea would receive 950,000 tonnes of fuel oil in exchange for dismantling its nuclear programs.

North Korea's chief negotiator, Kim Kye-gwan, told reporters: "The reason we could not set the deadline for the disablement of the nuclear facilities was that we didn't have enough time". He made clear that North Korea was seeking the construction of light-water nuclear power reactors in return for dismantling its nuclear facilities. While US negotiators have not ruled out such a step, right-wing

Republicans bitterly criticised the Clinton administration in 1994 after it signed an "Agreed Framework" with North Korea that provided two light-water reactors in return for freezing its nuclear facilities.

Chief US envoy Christopher Hill dismissed North Korea's claim that there was not enough time. He told the media: "If they want to get it done, it can be done. Disabling activities are ... not a matter of months, they're a matter of weeks." Outlining the Bush administration's agenda, Hill said the US wanted the entire process of dismantling North Korea's nuclear programs and facilities, including its plutonium stockpiles used to make the crude atomic bomb tested last October, completed by the end of 2008. Only when North Korea ended its "dirty nuclear business" would the US consider the request for light-water reactors, he insisted.

The reason for North Korea's reluctance is obvious: Washington is effectively demanding Pyongyang give up its only bargaining chip in advance. If North Korea irreversibly disables then dismantles its nuclear facilities and stockpiles, the US and its allies can drag out the process of implementing their side of the bargain indefinitely. The Clinton administration failed to meet the deadline set under the Agreed Framework for the construction of light-water reactors. Pyongyang has no more reason to trust the Bush administration, which branded North Korea part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran.

At present, North Korea has only vague pledges and the operation of a working group to normalise relations. Pyongyang is seeking its removal from the US list of states sponsoring terrorism, the establishment of diplomatic ties, an end to the US economic blockade and a formal peace treaty to end the 1950-53 Korean War. The establishment of relations with Japan are complicated by Tokyo's hardline stance over the abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents in 1970s and 80s. Japan has refused to provide economic assistance, including fuel oil, to North Korea.

Negotiations have been further complicated by the Bush administration's insistence that North Korea provide details

of its alleged uranium enrichment program. The issue is a particularly sensitive one as the US exploited allegations that Pyongyang was conducting secret enrichment activities as the pretext for abrogating the Agreed Framework in 2002. North Korea reacted to the Bush administration's aggressive stance by pulling out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelling IAEA inspectors and restarting its Yongbyon reactor. North Korea has always denied US claims that it had admitted to having an enrichment program.

Referring to the alleged enrichment program, Hill specifically warned North Korea: "All means all, and we're not prepared to look the other way and pretend that a partial declaration is all." The demand that North Korea declare what may well be a non-existent program provides the Bush administration with an excuse in advance should it decide to walk away from the February agreement.

In a Congressional hearing in February, Joseph DeTrani, the top US intelligence officer on North Korea, admitted there was only a "mid-confidence" level that Pyongyang has a production-scale uranium program. Other analysts questioned the claim. In a recent report, David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector, likened the intelligence on North Korea's uranium enrichment to the claims about Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" used to justify the invasion of Iraq. "The analysis about North Korea's program also appears to be flawed," he wrote.

Jack Pritchard, a former Bush envoy to North Korea, told the *Financial Times* on July 24 that the uranium story was politically important for Washington. "October 2002 was the start of the unraveling of the 1994 [deal] and considering everything that has resulted from that, we can't just say that it's all behind us for the sake of getting on with the game." An unnamed senior South Korea diplomat warned: "The North Koreans will have to confess to a level of uranium enrichment that will satisfy the US."

In a comment on July 21, the *Financial Times* was sceptical that the Bush administration would stick to negotiations. Describing its "dogged diplomacy" with North Korea as problematic, the newspaper declared: "Such American tactics owe much to the way the Iraq war exposed the limits of American power, even as Pyongyang built up its nuclear program. But just because no other realistic options were available, there was no guarantee that this administration would proceed down the deal making route."

The cautious reference to "no other realistic options" underlines the fact that the Bush administration has never ruled out a military attack on North Korea—an option that layers of the European financial elite regard as catastrophic. Washington's disjointed and often contradictory approach to North Korea, stems from sharp tactical disagreements in the White House that have only been heightened by the US

debacle in Iraq. The most militarist faction led by Vice President Dick Cheney remains bitterly opposed to any concessions to North Korea and backs "regime change" in Pyongyang, not negotiations. The delays in transferring \$25 million to a North Korean account reflected this continuing opposition, with six Republican congressmen calling for the Government Accountability Office to determine if the transaction was illegal.

The incoherence of US foreign policy is highlighted by Washington's different postures on North Korea and Iran. North Korea has built and tested a nuclear bomb, albeit a crude one, yet the Bush administration has engaged in both multilateral and direct talks with North Korean negotiators. The February deal establishes a broad framework to resolve all outstanding issues, including so-called "rewards" to North Korea for dismantling its nuclear facilities. Iran, however, continues to adhere to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and denies any intention of building nuclear weapons. The US refuses to even hold discussions on the nuclear issue and other questions even though Tehran has indicated its willingness to discuss a comprehensive deal. Over the past six months in particular, the Bush administration has heightened its military threat against Iran.

In both cases, US policy is being driven, not by the nuclear issue, but by underlying strategic and economic considerations. Despite the disastrous occupation of Iraq, the White House continues to menace Iran as a means of advancing its ambitions to dominate the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. US hostility toward North Korea is a useful device for reasserting its ascendancy in northeast Asia against its major European and Asian rivals, particularly China. The current emphasis on Iran, rather than North Korea, is purely tactical and could be rapidly reversed. The February agreement commits the US to very little, while providing ample loopholes for renegeing and denouncing North Korea.



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