

Uncertainty hangs over deal to disable North Korea's nuclear facilities

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Last week, there was considerable euphoria in the media about peace on the Korean Peninsula. An agreement between the US and North Korea to disable the latter's nuclear facilities by the end of the year was finalised at six-party talks in Beijing. The deal was followed by a summit in Pyongyang between South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, at which the two leaders agreed to work toward a peace treaty to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War.

An end to the US confrontation with North Korea is far from certain, however, and could easily be reversed by Washington. Just days before the six-party talks, involving China, the US, the two Koreas, Japan and Russia, were due to start on September 19, news was leaked in the US media that North Korea may have been involved in providing nuclear material or technology to Syria. The claims fed into intense speculation over the details of an Israeli air strike on a Syrian building on September 6, about which Israel, Syria and the US have said virtually nothing.

Two days before the six-party talks were due to begin in Beijing, China suddenly postponed the gathering for a week without giving any reason. There may be many explanations for the delay, but a likely one is that the rather lurid and unsubstantiated revelations threatened to derail the negotiations and potentially become a major embarrassment to China. Beijing is no doubt aware that a hard-line faction of the Bush administration headed by Vice President Dick Cheney has been hostile from the outset to the six-party talks and any negotiations with the Pyongyang.

Significantly John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the UN, was in the forefront of spreading the rumours of a new Syrian-North Korean "axis of evil". Since leaving public office, Bolton has functioned as a de facto spokesman for the Cheney faction. He wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on September 25: "What the Israeli attack highlights, however—even if it does not prove conclusively for now—is that North Korea is a global threat." Bolton declared that the initial six-party agreement in February was "now merely a slogan", and called on Bush to take "a tougher, more realistic attitude to the issue".

Bolton's comments could perhaps be dismissed as those of a private individual, but they were reinforced by well-placed leaks to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. Moreover, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates declared that North Korean-Syrian nuclear cooperation, if true, would be "a matter of great concern". None of the media paid any attention to the outraged denials from North Korea and Syria. In the end, the accusations did not derail the six-party talks, but the entire episode demonstrated just how easily this or some other accusation could be exploited by the Bush administration to sabotage previous agreements and return to open confrontation with North

Korea.

In all probability, the issue was raised at the six-party talks. On September 26—just a day before the meeting started—the US State Department quietly imposed sanctions on a North Korean company, Komid, for allegedly proliferating missile technology. Chief US envoy Christopher Hill told reporters he had "forcefully" raised the issue of "proliferation". No mention was made of Israel's attack on Syria, but the implication was there. Behind closed doors, Hill undoubtedly exploited the allegations to pressure the North Korean delegation, but not to the point of causing a walk-out.

The agreement announced by China on October 3 outlined a timetable for North Korea to disable its 5-megawatt experimental nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, together with its associated reprocessing plant and nuclear fuel rod fabrication facility, by December 31. The US will fund the initial disablement and send a group of experts to North Korea within two weeks to prepare the process. North Korea also agreed to provide a full list of its nuclear programs before the end of the year and reaffirmed its commitment not to transfer nuclear technology to other countries.

In return, North Korea has received vague US promises that can be readily reversed. In line with the February agreement, Washington has pledged to move toward a full diplomatic relationship with North Korea. It will "begin the process" of removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and "advance the process" of lifting economic sanctions. Without giving any timeframe, the US will "fulfill its commitments to the DPRK [North Korea] in parallel with the DPRK's actions based on consensus reached at the meetings of the Working Group on Normalisation of DPRK-US Relations".

White House spokesman for national security Gordon Johndroe told reporters last week the normalisation of relations with Pyongyang was "all conditioned on [an] action-for-action" basis. This, he explained, meant North Korea must disable the Yongbyon nuclear facilities first, before any "actions on our end". The only concrete promise—to deliver 900,000 tonnes of desperately needed heavy fuel oil to North Korea—has yet to be finalised, with the "specific modalities" subject to further discussion in a working group.

Japan is also dragging its feet. Tokyo agreed in Beijing to make "sincere efforts" to normalise relations, but "on the basis of the settlement of the unfortunate past and the outstanding issues of concern". Japan has refused to provide aid to North Korea unless the question of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in 1970s and 1980s is first resolved. Just a week after the six-party talks, Japan extended its previous economic sanctions against North Korea.

Taken as whole, the agreement is full of pitfalls. While demanding an irreversible end to North Korea's nuclear programs, the Bush

administration has been careful to leave plenty of loopholes for the US to pull out of the deal. One example is the demand that North Korea declare all nuclear programs. The US has repeatedly claimed that North Korea has a secret, uranium enrichment program but Pyongyang denies its existence.

Washington exploited the allegation in 2002 to effectively destroy the Clinton administration's 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea and provoke a confrontation with North Korea. Pyongyang responded by pulling out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and restarting its mothballed Yongbyon reactor. Amid deadlocked six-party talks, North Korea exploded its first crude nuclear bomb last October.

Pressure on North Korea from China, concerned about a nuclear arms race in North East Asia, eventually led to renewed six-party talks and the February agreement. But even the first stage of implementation, involving the shutdown of the Yongbyon reactor in return for 50,000 tonnes of fuel oil, was dragged out. North Korea insisted that the US show good faith by releasing \$25 million frozen in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA) bank. The US Treasury Department, encouraged by right-wing US opponents of the February agreement, deliberately complicated what should have been a straightforward transaction by imposing sanctions on the BDA, making other banks wary about handling the money.

The agreement reached last week covers the second stage. As Bolton's campaign confirms, significant opposition still exists in the US to a deal leading to normal relations with North Korea. If the most militarist elements of the White House appear to have accepted last week's deal, it is only because they are currently preoccupied with pressing for military action against Iran.

Last week's agreement has nevertheless given a breathing space to the South Korean government in its efforts to reach a rapprochement with North Korea. The so-called Sunshine policy, first elaborated by former President Kim Dae-jung, Roh's predecessor, is aimed at opening up the north as a source of cheap labour and as a transit route to China, Russia and beyond. The Bush administration's aggressive stance toward North Korea effectively sabotaged the South Korean efforts.

If last week's talks had not reached agreement, it is doubtful that a peace treaty would have been discussed at the summit between President Roh and North Korea's Kim Jong-il. The meeting itself, only the second such summit of Korean leaders, may not even have taken place. The first summit took place in 2000 on the eve of the US election that installed Bush in the White House.

Roh brought to the summit an ambitious \$US11 billion aid program that has been likened to the US Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe following World War II. The aim is to provide the much-needed infrastructure to open up North Korea to foreign investors, particularly from the south. Accompanying Roh were the chief executives of major South Korean corporations, including Samsung Electronics, LG, Hyundai Motor, SK Corp and Posco, as well as the ministers of finance, science, agriculture, unification and defence.

Seoul is drawing up plans to develop six North Korean cities as "special economic zones". The most expensive one is in the western port city of Haeju, at an estimated cost of \$4.6 billion, followed by a \$2.5 billion expansion of the existing Kaesong industrial zone. South Korea will also provide funds to open or upgrade roads and railway links between Kaesong and Seoul.

To impress foreign investors about the "openness" of the North

Korean regime, Kim Jong-il proclaimed himself an "Internet expert". Kim stressed, however, that Internet connections would only be allowed in the free trade zones, not through the entire country. At the conclusion of talks, the two leaders issued a statement calling for a peace treaty to formally end their decades-long military confrontation.

A deal over North Korea's nuclear programs would lead to a closer integration of North East Asia, which already includes four major economies—China, Russia, Japan and South Korea—and the greater involvement of European powers in the region. Prior to the Bush administration's aggressive stance against Pyongyang, several EU countries were investigating the investment opportunities opening up in North Korea under the Sunshine policy. Moreover, the opening of the Korean peninsula raises the possibility of cheaper and faster transit and pipeline routes from Japan and South Korea to Russia, China and across to Europe.

By intensifying tensions over North Korea's nuclear programs, the US effectively scuttled the ambitions of its European and Asian rivals. Moreover, the confrontation served to justify the continued presence of tens of thousands of American troops and military bases in South Korea and Japan, as well as US plans to establish a regional missile defence shield in league with Japan. The North Korean nuclear issue has been a convenient lever for Washington to throw its weight around in North East Asia.

A comment by *Wall Street Journal* on October 6, entitled "Toward an America-Free Korea", openly warned about the dangers of any weakening of the US-South Korea alliance. "South Korea inhabits a historically dangerous neighborhood: in addition to North Korea, the other nearby countries are China, Russia and Japan. Without a US military alliance, where would South Korea turn for a partnership to enhance regional security?" The newspaper's answer was that it would "return to Korea's dreaded fate in the past as 'a shrimp among whales'."

South Korea is already a "shrimp" subordinated to one American "whale". While the article was written as a warning to Seoul, it expressed fears in American ruling circles that their influence in the region will be displaced by their "dangerous" rivals: China, Russia and Japan. "An end to the US-ROK [Republic of Korea] alliance, we should emphasise, is by no means in the cards—for now. But the two countries do not have to wait for the negotiated end to inter-Korean hostilities, or a formal termination of the US-ROK alliance, to reap a harvest of strategic risk. Some of those same dangers might also accrue well before an official end to the alliance, if the structure is allowed to weaken and to decline in credibility," the newspaper wrote.

Officially, the Bush administration has welcomed the "inter-Korean dialogue". However, as the *Wall Street Journal* comment indicated, powerful sections of the ruling elite believe that long-term US strategic interests in North East Asia are incompatible with a peaceful solution to Korea's north-south divide. The sudden eruption of allegations of a North Korean-Syrian nuclear connection demonstrates just how quickly a pretext for a renewed confrontation could be invented.



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