

Broken US promises undermine North Korean nuclear agreement

A deliberate US provocation

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The six-party agreement on the denuclearisation of North Korea is threatened with breakdown after Pyongyang took a series of steps this week to restart the plutonium reprocessing plant adjoining its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. While the US and international media have focussed attention on North Korea, its actions clearly have been taken in response to the US administration's refusal to meet Washington's commitments under the deal.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), North Korea is planning to introduce nuclear material into the plant next week. IAEA inspectors completed the removal of seals and surveillance cameras from the facility on Wednesday, as instructed by North Korean authorities, and will be barred from the plant, but not at this stage from the reactor and other facilities at the site.

US officials immediately criticised North Korea's decision. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned on Wednesday that the step would only heighten Pyongyang's international isolation. At the same time, she dismissed the suggestion that six-party talks, involving China, Russia, South Korea and Japan, as well as the US and North Korea, were dead, declaring: "By no means. We've been through ups and downs in this process before."

The deal has been fraught with difficulties since it was initially reached in February 2007. In the first phase, North Korea agreed shut down its reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, allow IAEA inspectors and provide details of its nuclear programs, in return for 50,000 tonnes of desperately needed heavy fuel oil. In the second stage, finalised in October 2007, Pyongyang agreed to disable its nuclear facilities under the supervision of US experts and provide a full list of its nuclear programs, in return for a schedule for providing another 900,000 tonnes of fuel.

Apart from vague commitments to ending economic sanctions and establishing normal diplomatic relations, the only US pledge was to remove North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and end the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act. The US has maintained punitive economic sanctions against North Korea since the end of the Korean War

in 1953 and has no diplomatic relations with Pyongyang.

North Korea carried out the process of disablement but only handed over a 60-page report on its nuclear programs in June, nearly six months after the December deadline, due to disagreements with Washington about its contents. As a demonstration of good will, Pyongyang demolished the cooling tower of its nuclear reactor in front of TV cameras, even though it was not immediately required by the agreement.

President Bush initially welcomed the steps and announced that the US would end North Korea's listing under the Trading with the Enemy Act and commence the 45-day process for removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. He made clear, however, that the two actions would be little more than symbolic, as "North Korea will remain one of the most heavily sanctioned nations in the world". Even so, the Bush administration was denounced by right-wing extremists such as former ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, who proclaimed the "final collapse of Bush's foreign policy".

By August, the Bush administration had reneged on its agreement to remove North Korea from the terrorist list and raised new demands for "a protocol of verification" of the contents of Pyongyang's report. Quite legitimately, the North Korean regime interpreted the decision as a sign of bad faith—the agreement had all along been premised on an "action for action" approach. In return for shutting its nuclear facilities and disabling its reactor under international supervision, North Korea had received nothing but relatively small amounts of fuel oil. The ending of the country's status as a sponsor of terrorism, while symbolic, was nevertheless a first step toward easing the economic blockade that has crippled its economy.

In mid-August, the North Korean regime called a halt to work on disabling its nuclear plant and warned that it would "consider a step to restore the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon to their original state," adding: "The United States is gravely mistaken if it thinks it can make a house search in North Korea as it pleases, as it did in Iraq." Last Friday, Pyongyang declared that it no longer expected or wished to be removed from the US terrorist list and announced its intention to restart its nuclear facilities.

There is undoubtedly a certain amount of bluster in North Korea's statements, as it has nothing else to bargain with, except its potential nuclear weapons capacity. But as Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund, told Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio on Thursday, North Korea was not "rushing pell mell" into restarting its facilities. Instead, it was "practically begging us to come back to the negotiating table". He estimated that it would take Pyongyang at least a year to restart its reactor. Starting the reprocessing plant will only enable the extraction of about 6 kilograms of plutonium from existing spent reactor fuel rods.

North Korea's announcement has, however, prompted a flood of speculation in the US and international media about the reasons behind its "provocative" act. Attention has been focussed on rumours about the ill-health of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il who failed to appear at a military parade held earlier this month to commemorate the regime's 60th anniversary. Various analysts have speculated, with little in the way of facts, that Pyongyang's "hard-line" stance may reflect a decision-making logjam while Kim recovers from a stroke.

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It may be that the North Korean leader is sick. It is also possible that there is a sharp political crisis in the Stalinist regime, which confronts major economic problems. But as far as the uncertainty surrounding the six-party nuclear agreement is concerned, it would be far more legitimate to ask why the White House has provocatively refused to take a very limited step in keeping its side of the bargain. Divisions within the Bush administration, rather than a crisis in Pyongyang, are likely to be the real reason behind the stalling of the nuclear agreement.

Earlier this month, Secretary of State Rice, who pressed for the six-party talks and a deal with North Korea, rather absurdly declared that the administration's diplomacy on Iran and North Korea was evidence that it would leave the non-proliferation issue "in far better shape than we found it". In fact, under the influence of Vice President Dick Cheney and US Secretary of State for Non-Proliferation John Bolton, the Bush administration immediately ended Clinton administration's rather tentative diplomatic opening toward Pyongyang and rapidly undermined the previous Agreed Framework under which North Korea's nuclear facilities were frozen.

Tensions rapidly escalated as the US accused North Korea of maintaining a secret uranium enrichment program then effectively pulled out of the Agreed Framework by halting promised supplies of fuel oil. Pyongyang responded in late 2002 by expelling IAEA inspectors, restarting its nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant, and withdrawing from the

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The attitude of the Bush administration was summed up by Bush's inclusion of North Korea in a so-called "axis of evil" with Iran and Iraq. The White House made clear its strategy was one of "regime change" not negotiations.

However, as the occupation of Iraq turned into a quagmire in 2003, the Bush administration tentatively accepted the start of six-party talks brokered by China. The move was always bitterly opposed by the most militarist elements of the White House, who sought on a number of occasions to obstruct negotiations. An initial deal in 2005 effectively collapsed after US Treasury officials secured the freezing of \$25 million of North Korean funds in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA) bank and abruptly pulled out of talks. The negotiations were only resumed after Pyongyang exploded a small nuclear device in October 2006.

In his comments to ABC radio, analyst Cirincione pointed to the divisions in the Bush administration between "pragmatists" such as Rice and "hardliners" led by Cheney, saying that he suspected the latter were "behind the decision not to take North Korea off the [terrorist] list". After noting the earlier steps to freeze North Korea's bank assets, he added that he saw the refusal to end North Korea's terrorist status "as the hardliners intervening again to put a stick in the spokes of these negotiations".

The fact that the Bush administration as a whole is now undercutting the North Korean agreement underscores the tactical character of the differences between the contending factions. One can only speculate as to the motives of the Bush administration as it reaches the end of its second term of office. But it does again raise the possibility that the embattled White House is preparing further provocations in the lead-up to the US presidential elections in a desperate bid to deflect attention from the worst financial crisis since 1929 and to bolster the fortunes of the Republican campaign.



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