

Bush administration belatedly takes North Korea off terrorism list

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The Bush administration's decision last Saturday to remove North Korea from the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism has prevented a breakdown of the six-party agreement on denuclearisation--at least, in the short term. Pyongyang, which had accused Washington of failing to keep its side of the bargain, immediately reversed its steps to restart its nuclear plant at Yongbyon.

North Korea announced on Sunday that it would resume step-by-step disabling of its nuclear reactor and associated facilities in line with the agreement reached in February 2007 at six-party talks, involving Japan, China, Russia and South Korea as well as the US and North Korea. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors reentered the Yongbyon nuclear complex on Monday and resealed equipment and reactivated cameras yesterday.

A crisis erupted in August after the Bush administration insisted on additional verification and inspection conditions in return for removing North Korea from the State Department list. Pyongyang had, if on occasions belatedly, carried out the steps required by the six-party agreement. It shut down its Yongbyon facilities, placed them under IAEA inspection and began the process of disablement. In June, it handed over a report on its nuclear programs and, in an extra sign of good faith, demolished the reactor's cooling tower.

North Korea had expected the US to take it off the terrorist list as part of the "action for action" approach contained in the 2007 agreement. When Washington failed to carry out what was one of its few commitments as part of the deal, Pyongyang halted its work on disablement then made clear that it would restart its nuclear facilities. Late last month, it announced that it would reopen its reprocessing plant and begin extracting plutonium from spent fuel rods. Last week, the North Korean military reportedly test-fired a number of short-range missiles.

US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill travelled to Pyongyang early this month for talks with top North Korean officials in a bid to salvage the denuclearisation agreement. In return for removing North Korea from the State Department list, Hill announced that a deal had been

reached on verification. While North Korea made some concessions, it is clear that the US was compelled to back down on its key demand for automatic access to sites other than Yongbyon. Such inspections will only take place on the basis of "mutual consent".

The US and international media have been quick to blame North Korea for the tense two-month standoff, but the real cause lies in bitter feuding inside the Bush administration. Its most right-wing layers, centred around Vice President Dick Cheney, opposed the 2007 six-party agreement from the outset and have been fighting a subterranean rearguard action to undermine its implementation.

Mike Chinoy, former CNN chief Asia correspondent, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* today that the "civil war over North Korea policy" in the Bush administration was evident in July when hardliners in the US State Department imposed "extremely intrusive" conditions for verification and inspection.

Chinoy explained: "The North Korean response was [that] there was nothing in the language of any of the agreements that we signed that requires us to agree to an intrusive verification protocol before you take us off the list. You are in effect moving the goalposts. Technically, the North Koreans were right and I have had senior American officials acknowledge as much.

The *New York Times* on Monday made a similar point, commenting: "The administration has been at war with itself over whether to go ahead with the North Korea pact despite objections from critics in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney, and even some members of the State Department's verification and compliance office." The article noted that the top official in the office, Paula DeSutter, had pointedly not defended the North Korean denuclearisation agreement when asked at a press conference last weekend about criticisms by former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton.

Bolton, a hard-line conservative, has repeatedly denounced the Bush administration's engagement in six-party talks with North Korea and the subsequent agreements. In a comment in the *Wall Street Journal* on Monday entitled "Bush's North

Korea surrender will have lasting consequences," he wrote in scathing terms of giving North Korea "one of its most-prized objectives" in return for vague promises on verification.

However, as the Bush administration itself was at pains to point out, the removal of North Korea from the US list will do little to end the international economic blockade that has been in place since the end of the Korean War more than half a century ago. The sanctions include those imposed by the US and its allies through the UN Security Council after North Korea detonated a primitive bomb in October 2006. The nuclear test led to the 2007 six-party agreement in which North Korea agreed to disable and ultimately dismantle its nuclear programs in return for economic assistance and the normalisation of diplomatic and economic relations.

The Bush administration's decision to take North Korea off the terrorist list has provoked criticism in Japan where the government had been pushing for Pyongyang to address the issue of its kidnapping of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Pyongyang has previously acknowledged the abductions and allowed some of the abductees to return to Japan, but Tokyo has been demanding a full accounting. While the official Japanese response has been muted, Finance Minister Shoichi Nakagawa described the US move as "extremely regrettable".

Axis of evil

Within the US, the abrupt twists and turns of White House policy on North Korea underscore its incoherence. On assuming office in 2001, the Bush administration immediately ended the Clinton administration's tentative diplomatic moves toward North Korea and undermined the 1994 Agreed Framework under which its nuclear activities had been frozen. Setting course for confrontation in early 2002, Bush named North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran.

In late 2002, the US provoked the collapse of the Agreed Framework by accusing North Korea of having a secret uranium enrichment program and halting American supplies of fuel oil. Pyongyang responded by expelling UN inspectors, withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and restarting its nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant. At the same time, the Bush administration sought to provoke an economic and political crisis in Pyongyang in order to bring about regime-change.

The Bush administration's provocations were not motivated by concern about the military threat posed by North Korea, nor the authoritarian character of the regime. By heightening tensions over North Korea, the US attempted to stamp its authority in North East Asia and undermine efforts by its European and Asian rivals to normalise

relations with Pyongyang and exploit the Korean peninsula as part of transport and pipeline routes linking the Eurasian landmass.

The military disaster that followed the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq forced the Bush administration to make a tactical shift over North Korea. The US toned down its rhetoric and tentatively accepted China's offer to broker six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear programs--a move that was bitterly opposed by the Cheney wing of the White House. An initial agreement in 2005 was effectively sabotaged by US Treasury officials who secured the freezing of \$25 million in North Korean funds in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia bank, provoking a walkout by North Korea from talks. Negotiations were only resumed after Pyongyang's nuclear test in October 2006.

Despite the bitterness of the debate inside the Bush administration and the broader political establishment, the differences are tactical in character. Far from representing any reversal of US militarism, the deal with North Korea allowed Washington to focus its attention on consolidating its occupation of Iraq and more recently on the escalating fighting in Afghanistan and over the border in Pakistan. The shift to a more aggressive war in Afghanistan, including US attacks inside Pakistan, has been championed above all by Democrat presidential candidate Barak Obama and his backers.

The crisis over North Korea in the past two months demonstrates how quickly a new tactical shift could be made. Should the economic and strategic interests of American capitalism require it, a pretext could be found to undermine the six-party agreement and return North East Asia to a state of high tension.



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