

US downplays North Korean regime's overtures

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The North Korean regime has reacted bitterly to the indifferent response of the Obama administration to Pyongyang's first talks with the United States since the death of its leader Kim Jong-il in December. American officials downplayed the discussions in Beijing over February 23-24 as only making "some moderate, modest progress". They also ruled out any quick decision on resuming food aid to North Korea in exchange for talks over US demands that Pyongyang end its nuclear weapons program.

North Korea, now nominally headed by Kim Jong-il's 27-year-old son, Kim Jong-un, is seeking the Obama administration's agreement to resume six-party talks, which include South Korea, China, Russia and Japan. The US, Japan and South Korea abandoned the talks and ended economic assistance and food aid to North Korea after it carried out its second nuclear test in 2009. Since mid-2011, the North has been requesting new talks, but without US-dictated conditions such as the international monitoring of its nuclear program or food aid distribution.

Pyongyang expressed its frustration at the recent inconclusive talks, issuing stronger than usual denunciations of annual military exercises by South Korean and American forces. This year's exercises began on February 27 and involve more than 200,000 South Korean troops and several thousand US personnel. A North Korean military statement denounced the exercises as a "silent declaration of war". The official news agency labelled them an "unpardonable infringement" upon the country's sovereignty and said North Korea was "fully ready to fight a war". Kim Jong-un was cited as calling for "powerful retaliatory strikes" if South Korean or

American ships entered waters claimed by North Korea.

South Korean military commanders dismissed the statements, claiming there had been no alteration in North Korean military deployments that suggested any change in the threat level.

There are indications Pyongyang's push for renewed talks is a desperate bid to reach a rapprochement with the US and South Korea in order to secure economic aid. While information on the internal situation in North Korea is limited, what has been reported points to a country wracked with economic chaos, glaring social inequality and social tensions.

The *Washington Post* reported February 16 on the impact of the steady collapse of state planning in the North Korean Stalinist state since 1992, when it lost the patronage of the former Soviet Union. A vast official and black market now exists in which goods and services are traded using only foreign currencies—particularly the Chinese yuan, the US dollar and the euro. Those with access to foreign currency are, above all, members of the state and military hierarchy, a burgeoning class of traders and petty proprietors and those with family connections in South Korea. Marcus Noland, a North Korea economic analyst, told the *Post*: "It's an implicit signal of the weakness of North Korean economic institutions."

The official currency, the won, has been made effectively worthless by runaway inflation. According to the *Post*, a kilogram of rice that could be purchased from a state-run food dispenser for 20 won in 2009 now sells in some areas for 4,000 to 5,000 won. CBS News

reported on February 26 that in Chinese supermarkets catering for the elite in the capital Pyongyang and cities near the Chinese border, a jar of honey sells for 36,100 won—one third of the average monthly salary.

The working class confronts food shortages and has no capacity to purchase from the black market. In mid-2011, when the World Food Program (WFP) faced funding and supply difficulties for its emergency food relief effort in North Korea, it concluded that “much of the population ... suffered prolonged food deprivation.”

The WFP estimates that 3.5 million people, especially among the elderly and children—out of a population of 24 million—face the risk of starvation this year. Earlier this month, it declared: “We continue to have supplies available to see us through the next three to four months, but will require significant new funding to ensure these distributions can continue through the later, most difficult, lean season months of this year.”

On Monday, the Chinese government took the unusual step of revealing that it had also held talks with North Korea last week and had been asked to provide greater food assistance to the country. In a pointed reference to South Korea, Japan and the US, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman told a press conference: “China has always done as much as it can to provide help to North Korea. We also welcome other concerned parties and the international community to provide all forms of support and help ... This would help North Korea overcome its temporary difficulties.”

The Obama administration, backed by the South Korean and Japanese governments, is sending out the opposite signal. They are seeking to exploit the economic and social crisis in North Korea to pressure both the regime and China into unconditionally accepting their terms for any resumption of economic assistance. Peter Beck, the head of the Korea office of the US Asia Foundation, pointed to the calculations in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo in comments to the *Korea Times* on February 9. The article was headlined: “N. Korea sees ominous signs in Syria.”

Syria is the target of a regime-change operation modelled on the overthrow of the Gaddafi government

in Libya in 2011. With US and European encouragement, social discontent directed against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad has been escalated into a civil war and international intervention is being prepared.

Beck told the *Korea Times*: “It’s fair to say that North Korean leaders are watching events unfold and are probably concerned or even alarmed. Hopefully they are getting the message that without reform, pressure will build ... My hope is that the North is studying the case in Myanmar [Burma] as closely as that of Syria. Myanmar shows there is a path forward that doesn’t involve killing your own people.”

The Burmese “path forward” is one of submission to US dictates and the undermining of Chinese political and economic influence over the country. The military regime in Burma has made a significant reorientation of foreign policy since the Libyan war. It has complied with Washington’s demands for elections and power-sharing with the pro-US forces around opposition leader Aung San Sui Kyi.

The obvious difference between Burma and North Korea is that the Korean peninsula is viewed in China as critical to its strategic and military interests. As many as 150,000 Chinese troops lost their lives driving US and other foreign forces back from the Korean-Chinese border in the 1950-53 Korean War. Any attempt to sideline China from determining the future of the North Korean state would rapidly heighten tensions throughout North East Asia.



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