

China tells North Korea to resume talks on nuclear program

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Last Wednesday, North Korea sent a senior envoy to China to address the growing rift between Pyongyang and Beijing. Choe Ryong-hae, a vice-marshall and director of the General Political Bureau in the North Korean People's Army, met with high-level Chinese officials, including President Xi Jinping, during a three-day visit.

In order to mend relations, Choe delivered a personal letter from North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to Xi that emphasized “the need to carry forward and consolidate the traditional DPRK [North Korea]-China friendship.”

But in an unusually public and strongly-worded message, Xi reportedly told Choe: “The Chinese position is very clear: no matter how the situation changes, relevant parties should all adhere to the goal of de-nuclearization of the peninsula, persist in safeguarding its peace and stability, and stick to solving problems through dialogue and consultation.”

In response, Choe was quoted by China's CCTV as stating that Pyongyang was willing to work with all sides in order to “appropriately resolve the relevant questions through the six-party talks and other forms.” He added that North Korea was “willing to take active measures in this regard.”

The six-party talks are a forum hosted by China since 2003, involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, intended to allow North Korea to negotiate a deal with Washington to abandon its nuclear programs.

North Korea was forced to walk out of the six-party talks in late 2008, when the former Bush administration in the United States suddenly backtracked on Pyongyang, proposing additional verification protocols to confirm denuclearization—even as Pyongyang had expressed its good will by shutting down a key nuclear reactor.

In an attempt to force the Obama administration to make concessions, North Korea carried out two more underground nuclear tests, in 2009 and this February, along with long-range ballistic missile tests. The Obama presidency has made no move to return to six-party talks, however.

North Korea's nuclear “threat” is a useful pretext to justify Obama's “pivot to Asia,” a giant strategic encirclement with military alliances and bases against China.

In March, during the verbal standoff with the North, the US announced it would increase the number of ground-based missile interceptors in the Asia-Pacific region by nearly half, a move planned well in advance. Washington also sent nuclear-capable bombers on runs over the Korean Peninsula. These and other actions aimed to intimidate not only North Korea, but above all China—which Washington views as its main rival in the region.

China joined the US at the UN in approving a new resolution imposing sanctions on North Korea after the February nuclear test. China also cut off most financial transactions with the North Korea Import and Export Bank earlier this month—which was targeted by the US at the same time.

According to certain reports, China may have even cut off vital food supplies to North Korea. South Korean media have carried accounts of growing famine in North Korea, which is pleading with Mongolia for food aid. Wang Dong, a professor of international relations at Peking University, believes “the famine is a very important factor which is forcing North Korea to face squarely with reality.”

Significantly, Choe's visit to Beijing came just two weeks before Xi is to head to the US to meet with Obama in California from June 7–8—the first US-China

summit since Xi took over the presidency from Hu Jintao in March.

The US State Department's acting deputy spokesperson Patrick Ventrell declared last Wednesday that China notified the US in advance of Choe's visit. He stressed that Washington and Beijing "are of the same view that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is essential if we're to move forward with North Korea."

The informal working summit in California is likely to focus on a range of contentious issues between the two countries, from North Korea, to Washington's accusations that Beijing is carrying out cyber-attacks, and the civil war in Syria. By reining in Pyongyang, Beijing is attempting to come to terms with Washington, in the hope of warding off conflict.

In recent months, China has repeatedly sent out threatening signals of support for a "regime change" in North Korea, leaking out information to the German media, including "a contingency plan" to replace Kim Jong-un, with his older brother, Kim Jong-nam, who is living in China.

Two weeks ago, in an apparent attempt to mollify Beijing, hawkish Defense Minister Kim Kyok-sik, who was believed to be behind the November 2010 artillery attack on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, was replaced by Jang Jong-nam, a little-known army commander.

North Korea, faced with a collapsing economy, is also seeking to open itself up as a cheap labour source to world capitalism. Choe was taken to a technology park in the south of Beijing to emphasize with him the need for embracing capitalist markets and foreign investment. He reportedly declared: "Korea is trying hard to develop its economy and improve the people's lives, while hoping for peaceful international surroundings."

The North Korean state-run press highlighted Choe's trip to Beijing, without mention of the six-party talks. Despite Kim Jong-un's signals of willingness to follow pro-capitalist reforms in China and Vietnam, he is likely to face strong resistance from the military, which consumes much of the limited national economic output.

There is no guarantee the six-party talks will resume. Choe did not publicly say that North Korea would abandon nuclear weapons—a precondition the US and

South Korea have insisted upon to resume the six-party talks.

Zhang Liangui, a specialist on Korean issues at the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, told the state-controlled *Global Times* last Friday: "Despite China's repeated calls for denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and pushing for a return to the talks, Choe did not mention North Korea's position on denuclearization in his meetings with Chinese leaders."

Obama will no doubt use North Korea's refusal to pledge any denuclearization to pressure China for more concessions and prepare to ratchet up tensions once again on the Korean Peninsula.



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