

US officials turn down North Korean offer of nuclear talks

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Washington has flatly rebuffed a North Korean offer to resume international talks on its nuclear program, days after reports emerged of activity at North Korea's Yongbyon reactor.

While attending a Beijing conference, planned to coincide with the anniversary of an earlier agreement on North Korean disarmament signed on September 19, 2005, Pyongyang's chief nuclear negotiator Kim Kye-gwan stated: "We are ready to enter the six-party talks without preconditions."

These are talks involving the United States, North Korea, and four regional powers: China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.

China also pushed for the resumption of the six-party talks. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated at the conference in Beijing, "The situation on the peninsula was relatively stable when each party actively participated in negotiations. The situation was tense or even directionless when the talks stalemated."

The United States, backed by South Korea and Japan, flatly rejected any such talks, however. US State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf said, "The onus is on North Korea to take meaningful actions toward denuclearization and refrain from provocations."

The US has repeatedly made clear that it would only return to six-party talks if Pyongyang agreed in advance to give up its nuclear program—something the Stalinist regime has indicated it is not prepared to do.

Last week, US officials charged that North Korea had restarted the Yongbyon reactor, based on satellite images taken on August 31. David Albright, the president of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), which helped analyze the photos, said: "We know they're producing steam, but we don't know if this is a test or if the reactor is up and running."

The State Department's Harf criticized the North, stating: "Suffice to say, if it was true, it would be a violation of the relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions and, of course, contrary to North Korea's commitments under its September 19, 2005 joint statement."

Located north of the capital, Pyongyang, Yongbyon is the North's only source of weapons-grade plutonium. The site was setup and developed in the 1950s and 1960s, with aid from the USSR, though the current facility was built by the North Koreans in 1986. As part of an agreement signed in 2005 during six-party talks, the reactor was shut down in 2007 in return for aid. This deal collapsed in 2008, however, after the US provocatively demanded additional verification.

Washington's refusal to take up Pyongyang's offer comes shortly after pulling back temporarily from attacking Syria, risking a war with Iran and Russia, in its efforts to topple the Syrian regime. Faced with overwhelming popular opposition in the United States and Europe, and the risk of a world war, Washington seized on a deal brokered by the Russians to inspect and destroy Syria's chemical weapons programs. The Obama administration has emphasized that the war has not been called off, merely postponed.

The North Korean regime has long sought to use its nuclear program as a bargaining chip, offering to give it up in exchange for US guarantees that it could establish ties with Washington and integrate itself into the world capitalist economy. Ultimately, however, Pyongyang's attempts have run afoul of the deep geopolitical tensions in the region. These have now been brought to a boil by Washington's aggressive "pivot to Asia," aimed at isolating China and maintaining US geopolitical supremacy in Asia.

In April this year, the United States carried out a

series of provocations against North Korea, inflaming tensions and risking war, which included flying nuclear bombers over the Korean peninsula and dropping dummy bombs. All of this proceeded according to what US officials called a “playbook,” making clear that war preparations had been planned well in advance.

In keeping pressure on North Korea, Washington is making clear that its war drive against Syria and Iran in the Middle East will not distract it from continuing the “pivot to Asia.” Indeed, they are preparing to bring to East Asia the method of lies and provocations linked to “weapons of mass destruction” that were first used to justify US wars in the Middle East.

In August, during the ASEAN meetings in Brunei, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel met with his South Korean counterpart Kim Kwan-jin to draw attention to North Korea. Hagel later told Congress that North Korea has a large stockpile of chemical weapons. His spokesperson George Little simply said, “We have very good information” on the issue.

Hagel’s spokesperson connected the case for war against Syria using the North Korean threat, saying, “If we sit idly by and allow the Syrian regime to perpetrate atrocities the likes of which we’ve seen recently, then what signal does that send to countries like North Korea?”

In trying to encourage China to agree to an attack on Syria last week, James Miller, the US undersecretary of defense said of his talks with Chinese officials: “I emphasized the massive chemical weapons arsenal that North Korea has, and that we didn’t want to live in a world in which North Korea felt that the threshold for chemical weapons usage had been lowered.”

The South Korean government has also taken up the US political line against the North and by extension, against Syria. Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin followed up his visit with Hagel by echoing the same concerns over chemical weapons and backing the war against Syria.

On Tuesday, South Korea released a statement condemning Syria for using of chemical weapons, citing the UN report released the day before. Even though the report did not assign blame for the attack to the regime or the US-backed Islamist opposition, the statement declared: “The U.N. report released on Sept. 16 seems to back up past assessments that the Syrian government is responsible for the massive use of

chemical weapons.”

Since coming to office in February, President Park Geun-hye, while speaking of building trust with North Korea, maintained the unpopular hardline stance of her predecessor Lee Myung-back in order to maintain Seoul’s alignment on the US “pivot.” Her government’s support of a US war on Syria and accusations over North Korean chemical weapons will only add to tensions on the Korean peninsula and the wider region.



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