

US blocked talks with North Korea before nuclear test

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A revealing article published in the *Wall Street Journal* on Sunday lifted the lid on back-channel discussions between US and North Korean officials before Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test on January 6 and rocket launch on February 7.

To further its own right-wing political agenda, the newspaper suggested that Obama had made major concessions to North Korea. "Days before North Korea's latest nuclear bomb test, the Obama administration secretly agreed to talks to try to formally end the Korean War, dropping a longstanding condition that Pyongyang first take steps to curtail its nuclear arsenal," the article stated.

The White House and State Department quickly scotched any notion that the Obama administration had been about to enter negotiations with Pyongyang before the January nuclear test. In an email to Reuters, State Department spokesman John Kirby declared: "To be clear, it was the North Koreans who proposed discussing a peace treaty."

The North Korean regime has long demanded a peace treaty to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War and open the way for diplomatic relations, a call that Washington has repeatedly rejected. The US has exploited the lack of any formal conclusion to the war to justify the continued presence of American military forces in South Korea and the ongoing diplomatic and economic isolation of Pyongyang.

Kirby continued: "We carefully considered their proposal, and made clear that denuclearisation had to be part of any such discussion. The North rejected our response. Our response to the NK proposal was consistent with our longstanding focus on denuclearisation."

In other words, the Obama administration maintained the position that has stymied any resumption of the six-

party talks, initiated by China and including the two Koreas, the US, Russia and Japan. Since assuming office, Obama has consistently insisted that Pyongyang take steps to freeze its nuclear programs before any resumption of talks.

North Korea's decision to conduct another nuclear test has only heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. For all its empty anti-imperialist posturing, Pyongyang's actions are aimed at securing relations with the major powers and integrating North Korea into the global market.

Nevertheless, Pyongyang is wary about making concessions to Washington which mean giving up its only bargaining chip. North Korea has twice signed agreements with the US and frozen its nuclear facilities, only to find that Washington has not lived up to its end of the deal.

In 1994, the Clinton administration pulled back from the brink of war with North Korea and signed an Agreed Framework with Pyongyang that opened up the prospect of the resumption of diplomatic relations. In return for promises of supplies of fuel oil and the construction of two light water power reactors, the North Korean regime shut down its nuclear facilities and placed them under international inspection.

Six years later, work on the power reactors had barely begun and the only step toward formal relations was a visit to Pyongyang by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on the eve of the US presidential election in 2000. After assuming office in 2001, President George W. Bush quickly wrecked the Agreed Framework and branded North Korea part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran, leading to a rapid escalation of tensions. Pyongyang pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled the international inspectors and resumed its nuclear programs.

In early 2007, following North Korea's first nuclear test, the Bush administration used the six-party talks to strike a second nuclear deal with Pyongyang. The agreement committed Washington to nothing other than to provide a limited amount of fuel oil and "move towards" full diplomatic relations. In return, Pyongyang had to freeze its nuclear facilities, allow the return of inspectors, and carry out the step-by step dismantling of all its nuclear programs.

Bush's willingness to reach any deal with North Korea was conditioned by the crises facing the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and his preparations for a military confrontation with Iran in the Persian Gulf. In 2008, as his administration's policies in the Middle East increasingly came under fire and the first tentative steps to talks with Iran began, Bush effectively sabotaged the 2007 deal. Even though North Korea had completed its requirements, the White House unilaterally demanded tough new verification procedures.

From the outset, Obama's foreign policy was bound up with mounting criticisms of Bush's preoccupation with the Middle East and failure to counter the rise of China. The Obama administration's attitude to North Korea and its rejection of six-party talks are part and parcel of its "pivot to Asia"—an aggressive diplomatic campaign and military build-up throughout the region aimed at subordinating China to US economic and strategic interests.

North Korea's nuclear tests and rocket launches have played directly into Washington's hands, by providing a pretext for the US to expand its military forces in South Korea and Japan, and to put pressure on China to rein in the North Korean regime. The US military build-up is not aimed primarily at North Korea, but at China. In wake of the last rocket launch, South Korea finally agreed to formal talks with the US over the stationing of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in the country—part of the Pentagon's preparations for fighting a war with China.

The US and South Korean militaries are due to begin their annual war games known as Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, which will be the largest ever, involving hundreds of thousands of troops and sophisticated air, ground and naval weaponry. These joint exercises have always been a thinly veiled rehearsal for war with North Korea. This year, however, they will be based on

aggressive new operational plan—OPLAN 5015—that envisages pre-emptive strikes into North Korea and "decapitation raids" on its senior leadership.

China is caught in a bind. Pyongyang's primitive nuclear tests are not only exploited by the US to justify a military presence but could also be used by Japan or South Korea as a pretext for developing their own nuclear weapons. At the same time, any effort by Beijing to tighten the economic screws on its ally could precipitate a collapse of the highly unstable North Korean regime, opening up the possibility of a US-backed client state in Pyongyang on China's northern border.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is due in Washington today for high-level talks that will undoubtedly include the Korean Peninsula and the escalating confrontation between the US and China in the South China Sea. In advance of his arrival, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying bluntly warned that North Korea should not be used as a front to install the THAAD system and "undermine China's own legitimate [security] interests."

Speaking on February 12, Wang said China would support a UN resolution to make North Korea "pay the necessary price" for its nuclear test and rocket launch. However, he also declared: "Sanctions are not the end. The purpose should be to make sure that the nuclear issue in the Korean Peninsula should be brought back to the channel of a negotiation-based resolution."

While one cannot categorically rule out a return to negotiations, any resumption would be on Washington's terms and would do nothing to halt the ongoing US military build-up in Asia.



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