

Washington and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis: From Muddling Multilateralism to Sanctions?

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Abstract

The viability of the Six-Party Talks as a medium to resolve the nuclear crisis increasingly is being called into question, particularly as Pyongyang claims to be reprocessing a second batch of spent fuel rods from its Yongbyon reactor and rumors swirl that the North is preparing to test a nuclear device. North Korea is proving adept at finding reasons to refuse to come back to the table, above all waiting for the “right conditions” to be met and now demanding the multilateral talks becomes a broader forum for “nuclear disarmament.” Washington has been trying to nudge the process along in vain, so far failing to convince the other four governments to buy into its North Korea approach. At this point, the only thing China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea seem to agree on is that the Bush Administration should be more “flexible.” Indeed Washington seems to be in a difficult position these days, together with its fraying relations with South Korea, a key ally in the region and one whose favorable relations are crucial to a constructive resolution of the nuclear issue. Clearly, the present North Korea policy of the second Bush Administration is in need of some serious adjustments if it is to have any hope of stopping the North’s nuclear breakout. After examining the second Bush Administration’s North Korea team, this paper explores the divergences within the Six-Party framework and considers the United States’ role in the multilateral talks. The paper concludes with suggestions for attempting a breakthrough, including the activation of a special envoy or third country to help bridge the deep mistrust between Washington and Pyongyang.

Key Words: Six-Party Talks, nuclear disarmament, the Bush Administration, North Korea, multilateralism

The viability of the Six-Party Talks as a medium to resolve the nuclear crisis increasingly is being called into question, particularly as Pyongyang claims to be reprocessing a second batch of spent fuel rods from its Yongbyon reactor and rumors circulate of an imminent nuclear test. North Korea is proving adept at finding reasons to refuse to return to the table, above all waiting for the “right conditions” to be met and now demanding the multilateral talks becomes a broader forum for “nuclear disarmament.” Washington has been trying in vain to nudge the process along, so far failing to convince the other four governments to endorse its North Korea approach. At this point, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea only seem to agree that the Bush Administration should be more “flexible.” Indeed Washington seems to be in a difficult position these days, accentuated by fraying relations with South Korea, a key ally in the region and one whose support is crucial to a constructive resolution of the nuclear issue. Clearly, the present North Korea policy of the second Bush Administration requires significant adjustment if it is to have any hope of stopping the North’s nuclear breakout.

In the current environment, there seems little chance of North-east Asian governments agreeing on a North Korea policy in the face of strong regional nationalism and Pyongyang’s clever divisive tactics. Moreover, recent calls for Washington to negotiate directly with North Korea outside the Six-Party framework illustrate the growing recognition of the failings of the Talks. The fate of the Six-Party Talks remains to be seen, in light of uncertainty in Washington’s diplomatic approach that to date has amounted to waiting for North Korea to capitulate or collapse. It is clear that Washington must stop procrastinating and devise a diplomatic strategy that seriously presents North Korea with an offer that the other four parties can embrace. Other regional governments must also do their part to bring North Korea back to the table, and back to reality. Unless it is held to account

by its allies and neighbors, Pyongyang may succeed in avoiding disarmament. After examining the second Bush Administration's North Korea team, this paper explores the divergences within the Six-Party framework and considers the United States' role in the multilateral talks. The paper concludes with suggestions for attempting a breakthrough, including the activation of a special envoy or third country to help bridge the deep mistrust between Washington and Pyongyang.

Ironically, the second Bush Administration's Six-Party Talks strategy is weakening despite recent attempts to be more conciliatory. President George Bush rebuffed his hardliners during the November 2004 APEC summit meeting in Santiago by reaffirming the US policy of seeking a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue. The next month his incoming National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley stressed support for the "transformation" of North Korea by economic means rather than regime change. Bending to pressure from China and South Korea, the US announced at the end of the year that it would join the next round of talks without any pre-conditions. Unfortunately, the rhetoric against North Korea from the Bush Administration has not abated. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's "outpost of tyranny" remark during her confirmation hearings led to demands for an apology by the North, but President Bush himself surpassed her rhetoric by calling Kim Jong Il a "tyrant" during a press conference on April 28. The North reciprocated with a barrage of invectives. This petty trading of insults has led Beijing to express its exasperation with both Washington and Pyongyang.

Almost certainly strong opposition to a hard-line policy from South Korea and China is forcing the Bush Administration to take a more conciliatory approach despite President Bush's visceral hatred of Kim Jong Il. Given the failed North Korea policy of the last Bush Administration and lingering doubts as to the ability of this "neo-conservative"-dominated White House to handle foreign policy wisely,

it is difficult to be optimistic about the Administration's capacity to adopt a more enlightened approach. President Bush seems unable to look beyond his blinding good versus evil dualism to pragmatically resolve the world's most pressing nuclear threat. It seems equally unlikely that North Korea will respond favorably to any package deal - no matter how attractive - to give up its nuclear programs. The Bush Administration must nevertheless make such an offer to gain any endorsement from the other four parties for a more confrontational approach towards North Korea. The test of this second Bush Administration and its Korea staff will be whether they can garner the collective will of the other four parties to see an agreement through with both enticing incentives and the corresponding disincentives.¹

Washington's New North Korea Team²

Only time will tell what approach the new Bush team will ultimately take towards North Korea, but with the second Administration team almost complete, those shaping Northeast Asia policy are now evident. Despite assembling what is arguably the best Korea team to date, it is unclear whether they will be recognized by their superiors. The overriding vision shaping Bush Administration foreign policy remains Vice President Dick Cheney, whose unprecedented influence over US foreign policy during the first Bush term appears unabated in the second term. At the Department of State is former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, known more for her loyalty to President Bush than for her policy acumen, given the failure to prevent the September 11th attacks and the approval of the disastrous invasion of Iraq. Moreover, she failed to adequately perform the

¹ International Crisis Group, "North Korea: Where Next for the Nuclear Talks," November 15, 2004, available at www.icg.org.

² This builds upon an article which appeared in the December 2004 issue of *Shindonga*.

advisor's traditional role of managing the various personalities of the cabinet. It remains unclear exactly what line the State Department will take as Rice has yet to present her vision of America's place in the world. It is certain, however, that Rice will directly pursue President Bush's wishes in US diplomatic channels more than did Powell.³ Unlikely to be able to challenge neo-conservatives in the White House, Rice may influence the appointment of former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz to the Presidency of the World Bank and of former Under Secretary of State for Nonproliferation John Bolton as Ambassador to the United Nations. The appointments reaffirmed that the "neo-cons" remain ascendant and unrepentant for past blunders. On the other hand, neither will have as much influence over policy making as before, as two influential figures from the first Bush Administration are now outside the inner circle of Washington's foreign policy making. Fortunately for Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld remains bogged down in Iraq and consumed by his ongoing reform of the US military services. The hard-core realists, with whom Secretary Rice and her new Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick associate, may well outshine the neo-cons in foreign policy. In reality, it matters little who directs foreign policy if there is no effective diplomatic strategy in place and if working level specialists are ignored.

In most government hierarchies, there tends to be an inverse relationship between power and knowledge. Those with the most power tend to have the least knowledge of specific issues or countries. This is especially true when it comes to the US government and the Korean Peninsula. To compensate for their lack of depth, top officials must rely on the advice they receive from those who monitor and manage Korean Peninsula affairs. Unfortunately, President Bush and his inner circle are not known for taking the views of working level

³David Sanger and Steven Weisman, "Cabinet Choices Seen as Move for More Harmony and Control," *New York Times*, November 17, 2004.

specialists into account when deciding policy. With the exception of former Secretary of State Colin Powell, their approach has lacked appreciation of nuance and ignores inconvenient facts. Secretary Rice is a Kremlinologist by training with little prior experience in Asia Pacific issues or international negotiations. The question remains whether she and the rest of the inner circle will listen to those advising her on Korea.

The impressive lineup of highly capable Asia specialists in the National Security Council and at the State Department gives rise for optimism. Senior Asia Director at the National Security Council, Michael Green, is one of the most knowledgeable senior Bush officials on Asia and the most articulate and persuasive defender of the Bush North Korea “policy.” At times, he can be convincing that the Bush Administration had a coherent policy towards North Korea. The new junior NSC Asia Director, Victor Cha, is both the first Korean-American and Korean specialist to be in charge of Asia policy at the White House, a position usually filled by a China or Japan specialist. His articles in recent years have been in line with the views of the Bush Administration, but he is by no means a neo-con. Cha could influence US policy in East Asia given his reported close ties with Rice.

At the State Department, Christopher Hill, the extremely active and able former Ambassador to Korea, has become the Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs and the lead US negotiator for the Six-Party Talks. Hill is a career diplomat who honed his skills as one of the key peace negotiators in the Balkans. The Principle Deputy Assistant Secretary for Asia, Evans Revere, also has experience in Korea, having served as the Deputy Chief of Mission in the US Embassy in Seoul and as Director of the Korea Desk. He is also fluent in Korean. Hill, Revere, and Korea Desk Director James Foster have an extremely capable group of professionals working with them, so the Bush Administration will have all the information it needs for deve-

loping a more effective strategy to diplomatically resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, it remains to be seen if President Bush and his new team will listen to them. Ironically, this is the first time the junior Asia positions at the NSC and the PDAS at State have been filled by Korea specialists, and both Michael Green and Ambassador Hill have more experience working in and on Korea than their predecessors. Assistant Secretary Hill was even in Seoul trying to coordinate North Korea policy when President Bush made his “tyrant” remark on April 28.

Mind the Gap: Divergent Perceptions and Priorities in the Nuclear Talks

Even if Washington decision-makers do listen to their Asia specialists when crafting policy, it will do them little good should their credibility with Six-Party allies be in doubt. The position of the United States in the Six-Party Talks is equal to its standing with its allies. Washington-based Given the intelligence failures in Iraq and the inability to provide incontrovertible evidence of the North’s suspected highly enriched uranium program, America lacks credibility.⁴ The recent report released by the Washington-based Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction chided the Bush Administration for knowing “disturbingly little” about North Korea’s nuclear program.⁵ The Bush Administration and Congress are preoccupied with human rights abuses and vilifying North Korea, undermining Washington’s credibility with China and South Korea, the two countries most important to dealing with North

⁴David Sanger and William Broad, “Solving A Deadly Riddle: Who Sold Nukes?,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 1, 2005.

⁵Scott Shane and David Sanger, “Blind To Nuclear Dangers, Panel Finds,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 2, 2005.

Korea. Seoul still has not forgotten Washington's mistaken claim in 1998 that the North was building a secret nuclear facility in Kumchang-ri, only for inspections to reveal it was just a hole in the ground. After Secretary Rice's March 2005 trip to the region, Washington began to understand how distanced it has become from its partners. It should trouble the Bush team that the five parties have been unable to come up with anything close to a common approach, allowing Pyongyang to exploit their differences to buy time and avoid difficult choices.⁶

President Bush's near-devout adherence to the multilateral framework, despite his unilateralist tendencies, as the only structure within which to deal with North Korea means that for a diplomatic solution to work, Washington must be more responsive to the positions of the other parties. However, a perception gap and diverging priorities among the Six-Party allies are undermining the multilateral framework. Washington tends to focus on nuclear issues and human rights, while the other parties have other priorities to consider, such as stability on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea's quest for a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula and China's pursuit of stability on its northeastern border cancel out their support for any coercive measures that would put pressure on North Korea towards disarmament. Another ally for North Korea, Russia, is more concerned about US strategic designs in East Asia than Pyongyang's nuclear activities. Although Japan is moving closer to the US position with the implementation of "virtual" sanctions on March 1 that require North Korean ships visiting Japan to have proper insurance, Washington cannot depend solely on Tokyo's backing. The Bush Administration would make greater headway with the Six-Party Talks if emphasis was placed on appreciating Northeast Asian priorities and perspectives on North Korea and the nuclear crisis, most notably of the two countries imperative to

⁶Michael H. Armacost, "Six-Party Talks Are Looking Useless," *JoongAng Daily*, March 12, 2005.

North Korea's survival: South Korea and China.

Washington and Seoul are drifting apart and it is unclear if the Bush team realizes the extent of the difference between the two long-standing allies. Since taking office in 2003, South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun has maintained his predecessor's policy of engagement towards North Korea. President Roh's approach to North Korea is one of peaceful and flexible diplomacy, devoid of any real threats or pressures on North Korea, ensuring that South Korean prosperity will not be undermined by potential conflict.⁷ Government efforts focus more on seeking peaceful engagement and reconciliation with the North than on hindering Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, the anti-thesis of the US attitude to North Korea. Last November, in a series of speeches, President Roh ruled out any forceful action against Pyongyang through the Six-Party Talks, including military measures or economic sanctions, and declared he could not cooperate with anyone seeking regime change in the North.⁸ In short, Roh frankly warned the hard liners in Washington that their policy preferences would not meet his approval. South Korea wants a nuclear-free Peninsula, the same as the other four parties, but it will not pursue nuclear disarmament at the cost of peace and prosperity. South Korean officials have commented that although the North Korean issue is a matter of "national survival" for South Korea, it is merely a nonproliferation or human rights issue for the United States.⁹

The country with perhaps the most influence over North Korea does not share US priorities for the North or for the Korean Peninsula.

⁷ Republic of Korea National Security Council, "Peace, Prosperity, and National Security: National Strategic Strategy of the R.O.K.," March 2004.

⁸ Donald Gross, "South Korea Confronts Hard-liners on North Korea," *Pacific Forum CSIS Comparative Connections* accessed March 22, 2005, http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/0404_skorea.html.

⁹ David Shin, "ROK and the United States 2004-2005: Managing Perception Gaps?," *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Special Assessment*, February 2005.

For various reasons - among them stability on its northeastern border and avoiding collapse of a longstanding ally - Beijing refuses to place too much pressure on Pyongyang and is not as forthcoming in its support for the US position on North Korea publicly as it is rumored to be privately.¹⁰ Recent statements by Chinese officials indicate that Beijing is neither ready nor willing to take a more confrontational line with Pyongyang. Uncomfortable at being put in Washington's spotlight, and at the Bush Administration's own reluctance to be more forthcoming in the talks, Beijing has made clear that it sees its own influence over North Korea as limited, even though China is North Korea's largest trader and importer of fuel. Instead, Beijing is limiting its role to arranging the Talks, and putting pressure on the US to deal directly with the North.¹¹ China's reluctance to do more is a problem for the Bush team, which sees Chinese backing as crucial to "any expanded international response, including United Nations sanctions, a trade embargo, or military action."¹² Without China's backing, the Six-Party Talks and diplomatic pressures would be nugatory for the United States. Without Washington's engagement in the Talks, Beijing feels constrained in its ability to persuade Pyongyang.

The Bush Administration will continue to court Beijing because it believes a lasting solution to the nuclear crisis is possible only with China as a party to any final agreement. During the presidential election debates, Bush stated his belief that North Korea would be reluctant to break yet another agreement with the US and South Korea should China also be a signatory to that agreement.¹³ However, most

¹⁰ Joseph Kahn, "China Questions Data on North Korea," *New York Times*, March 7, 2005.

¹¹ Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao, "Press Conference," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 22, 2005.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "The Presidential Candidates' 2nd Debate: 'These Are the Differences,'" *New York Times*, October 9, 2004.

American observers now acknowledge that Chinese authorities, like the South Koreans, appear to attach greater importance to maintaining stability than to resolving the nuclear crisis. If China is not prepared to get tough with North Korea should Pyongyang refuse to accept a reasonable offer or break another agreement, the Six-Party framework appears pointless. Washington must determine under what conditions, if any, China would accept taking more compelling measures towards Pyongyang. The extent to which China and the United States cooperate in dealing with North Korea despite their differing interests will have a definite bearing on the likelihood of a settlement.

Because Washington's position in the Six-Party Talks depends heavily on that of the other four governments, the palpable divergent approaches of the US and its Asian allies are significant and should alarm Washington's Asian specialists. Devoid of a "unified front" and a sound diplomatic strategy, the US appears increasingly powerless to stop the North's nuclear breakout. As a result, Washington's North Korea policies are facing ever more anxious partners in Northeast Asia. Some scholars in South Korea and China now point to the Bush Administration's harsh rhetoric as being almost equal to the North's increasingly provocative statements and actions during the spring of 2005.

For its part, the Bush Administration has grown frustrated with other parties seeking more US flexibility and incentives to the North, despite the more restrained US position in recent months having met with little to no response from Pyongyang.¹⁴ This particularly looks curious as China, South Korea, and Russia publicly shy away from pressuring the North for more flexibility and moderation. When North Korea issued its February 10th declaration of having nuclear weapons

¹⁴Interview with US Government Official, March 29, 2005. See also Joel Brinkley, "Visiting Korea Base, Rice Sends Forceful Reminder to the North," *New York Times*, March 20, 2005.

and of rejecting the Six-Party Talks, these countries issued excuses for Pyongyang rather than reprimands.¹⁵ Appeasement is acceptable if it works. History shows that instead of earning the North's genuine compliance, giving more carrots without sticks will whet Pyongyang's appetite for further concessions and give it more time to bolster its "nuclear deterrent." There is also the troubling perception in Washington that South Korea and China could prefer peaceful coexistence with a nuclear North Korea if this will help the Peninsula avoid instability and war or a hard landing for the regime.¹⁶

Persuading Washington to make policy consistent with the Northeast Asian view of North Korea, or ideally crafting an effective and proactive diplomatic approach would consolidate a diplomatic front to the North among the five parties. Such an initiative, however, would require Northeast Asian countries to fully acknowledge their own responsibilities in holding North Korea accountable, and to take account of Washington's position and policy imperatives. Washington must therefore pay closer attention to the priorities and perceptions of its Six-Party allies. Unless the Bush Administration can find common ground with its allies that combine incentives and disincentives, further Six-Party Talks will be useless.

Washington's Perspective on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The United States views the world through a post 9/11 prism in which North Korea's potential if not practice of selling nuclear-related materials to states such as Iran, Pakistan, and Libya is a

¹⁵Unification Minister Chung Dong-young's statements right after Feb 10th announcement.

¹⁶Denny Roy, "China-South Korea Relations: Elder Brother Wins Over Younger Brother," *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Special Assessment*, October 2004.

considerable cause for concern.¹⁷ While Northeast Asian countries focus on the stability of the Korean Peninsula, US policy is focused chiefly on thwarting proliferation and the use and transfer of nuclear weapons and materials. From Washington's perspective, North Korea's nuclear program is a matter of national security. Many security experts believe a nuclear strike on the US is inevitable from a state or, more likely, a non-state actor who obtains nuclear materials from illicit proliferation networks.¹⁸ Northeast Asian countries underestimate the vulnerability the US feels in the post-9/11 world to threats of nuclear proliferation and WMD, which helps explain Washington's obstinacy towards the North. The Bush Administration regards North Korea's endless conditions to come back to the Talks as proof that the isolated country will find any and every opportunity to evade demands to end its nuclear programs. Washington is therefore skeptical that North Korea is interested in bargaining away its nuclear program, a view that in part may illustrate the Bush team's reluctance to diplomatically engage a situation they are convinced will result in failure.¹⁹ In contrast, the South Korean government believes the North is prepared to make a deal.²⁰ Pyongyang's recent demand that the Six-Party Talks become nuclear disarmament talks must reaffirm the Bush team's view that the North Koreans will do everything in their power to undermine the Talks or any other attempt, no matter how serious or lucrative, to get them to denuclearize.

The Bush Administration will go to great lengths to avoid dealing unilaterally with North Korea, believing it can only lead to another flawed agreement. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell

¹⁷ *New York Times*, March 30, 2005.

¹⁸ Kuniharu Kakihara, "The Post-9/11 Paradigm Shift and Its Effects on East Asia," *Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS) Policy Paper 292E*, January 2003.

¹⁹ Interview with US Government Official, March 24, 2005.

²⁰ "The North Korean Question and the R.O.K.-US Alliance," Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, *IFANS Review*, July 2004.

summed up Bush's views during a television interview last Fall:

“The North Koreans desperately want to make this a US-North Korean problem to see what else they can ask US for; to pay them; to reward them for their misbehavior. And we have chosen... not to get caught in their trap again.”²¹

The Bush Administration may only now be confronting the considerable gap with their Asian allies over handling North Korea. Secretary Rice visited Northeast Asia in March 2005 to convince the other parties that it is in each one's interest to use whatever leverage they have to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. This mission was undermined, however, by Asian views of US policy as potentially damaging to regional stability and by questions of credibility.²² Washington has seemed all too eager to convince others of North Korea's nuclear pursuits with unverified intelligence meant to stir Six-Party members to adopt more coercive measures towards the North.²³

Despite these misgivings, the Bush team has in recent months started to respond to calls from Six-Party allies to be more flexible and less confrontational. A truly effective diplomatic strategy nevertheless remains elusive. Since tabling a proposal at the last Six-Party Talks in June 2004, Washington has continued to articulate, though not as clearly as it could, the economic aid and security guarantees Pyongyang would realize should it choose to return to negotiations and begin to disarm. US Asian advisors are reportedly disappointed in the lack of support their June proposal received from Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow.

²¹ Colin Powell interview with Mike Chinoy, *CNN International TV*, October 25, 2004.

²² Choi Jong Chul, “US-R.O.K. Alliance: Will it Wither or Rebound?,” Given at The Council on Korea-US Security Studies 19th Annual Conference, October 7-8, 2004.

²³ Kahn, “China Questions Data on North Korea.”

Instead of positively responding to the proposal, Washington's allies were silent and Pyongyang soon after declared the offer null and void, thereby avoiding another opportunity to settle the nuclear dispute.²⁴ Although pressure is building in Washington for President Bush to take a harder line to force the North to respond, the Bush Administration has so far focused on coaxing North Korea back to the talks. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice even called one of her "outposts of tyranny" a sovereign state during her Northeast Asia tour and has repeated the statement several times since. Time will tell whether the Bush team has finally grasped that threats and insults will not work with Pyongyang. The impasse will continue unabated, however, until Bush gives up hopes of a collapse or capitulation from Pyongyang and finally attempts to seriously engage in talks.

President Bush's restraint and expressed desire to resolve the nuclear issue in a peaceful and diplomatic manner is a positive sign. However, the overall mood in Washington has become increasingly hard line and inflexible towards North Korea, as demonstrated by the unanimous passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act last Fall. For the time being, pressure from China and South Korea has strengthened the voice of US officials favoring a more moderate approach to North Korea, who argue that a hard line risks alienating Washington's Six-Party allies and could further strain an already rocky US-South Korea alliance.²⁵

The underlying shift of alliances taking place in the region complicates the Six-Party process has been part caused by the US failure to defuse the nuclear crisis. The dispute over North Korea and concerns about Washington's destabilizing approach are causing countries

²⁴ Larry Niksch, "The Requirements of Credible R.O.K.-US Coordination in the Six-Party Talks," Presented at the Second Korea-US Security Forum, Jeju Island, March 30-April 1, 2005.

²⁵ Kim Choong Nam, "Changing Korean Perceptions of the Post-Cold War Era and the US-R.O.K. Alliance," *East-West Center Asia Pacific Issues*, April 2003.

such as South Korea to assess other potential partners because they see the US as an “obstacle to peaceful relations in the region.”²⁶ President Roh proclaimed a new doctrine in March 2005 in his attempt to pull away from the tripartite alliance and cement South Korea as an independent power, initiating what may become the unraveling of the US-ROK alliance with his notion of Korea as a balancer. Like most Cold War hangovers, the alliance is now seen as passé by progressive South Koreans. Washington can no longer rely on its traditional Northeast Asian allies to support its efforts to force North Korea to disarm.²⁷

Six-Party Talks: Exercise in Futility?

The probability of a lasting settlement with North Korea that permanently resolves the nuclear crisis rises dramatically as the North’s room to exploit differences among the five other parties diminishes. There are, however, increasing signs of disagreement over how to resolve the nuclear dispute, with the conciliatory tone of South Korea, China, and Russia chafing against the harder line of the US and Japan. Washington is assessing ways to increase pressure on North Korea with the Proliferation Security Initiative and possible sanctions referral to the United Nations Security Council. Indirect pressure tactics include the North Korean Human Rights Act and a renewed call to include human rights abuses in the Six-Party agenda, which can only further complicate and frustrate the process.²⁸ In March press

²⁶ Doug Struck, “Alliances Shifting in Northeast Asia,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2003.

²⁷ Shin Jeong-rok, “Roh Hints at New East Asian Order,” *Chosun Ilbo*, March 23, 2005.

²⁸ Undersecretary of State Michael Kozak suggested as much in comments made with the release of the State Department’s *2005 Human Rights Report* in late March.

interviews, Secretary Rice vaguely threatened to pursue “other options” should Pyongyang not return to the Talks soon, though it remains to be seen how those options will be realized without regional support. Fearing a collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime, South Korea and China, North Korea’s primary economic benefactors, are unlikely to consider sanctions or other coercive measures.²⁹ As an added distraction, fierce nationalist clashes in Northeast Asia weaken the prospect of a unified voice towards North Korea. For example, the Dokto issue provides a useful distraction that Pyongyang can exploit to drive another wedge in the five-party group.

The Six-Party Talks are much closer to collapse than breakthrough. Indeed, evaluation of the Six-Party process over the past two years demonstrates that the multilateral approach has had little if any success. Thanks to divisions among the Six-Party allies, there has been no progress made in even slowing North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.³⁰

The only glue holding together the Six-Party framework is the common goal of the five parties to end the North’s nuclear program. The method to pursue this remains a challenge. For the Six-Party Talks to retain legitimacy, the allies must work to narrow gaps to convince the North that negotiation is the only solution. In particular, Washington must devise a more coherent diplomatic strategy and coordinate policy with Seoul and Beijing, taking into consideration their divergent perceptions of and approaches to North Korea. Without a coordinated approach, the Six-Party Talks merely provide a pretence that something is being done to resolve the crisis while little substantial progress is made.

History has shown that North Korea cooperates best when there

²⁹ Sebastian Moffett and Gordon Fairclough, “Rice Urges Return of North Korea to Nuclear Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2005.

³⁰ Charles Pritchard, “The New Administration and the North Korean Nuclear Issue,” Sejong-SAIS Workshop on Korea, United States, and Northeast Asia: *Seeking Strategic Cooperation after the Presidential Election*, November 2004.

are clear incentives and disincentives in place, which any solution must clearly articulate in detail. The second Bush team must outline a comprehensive offer that describes the exact benefits to North Korea in exchange for its nuclear programs and weapons. The International Crisis Group has offered such a plan in its new report on North Korea.³¹ Only a serious offer from the United States in good-faith would allow the other partners to increase pressure on the North should it not accept a deal. One prominent Korea analyst has suggested the Six-Party format be used to generate “regional ownership” in the implementation of a final settlement, helping to administer security guarantees and economic assistance after an agreement is reached.³² A solution to the nuclear impasse is not likely to be found in the Six-Party framework until Washington determines to engage the North diplomatically and the other four parties commit themselves to see through an agreement that does not let Pyongyang off the hook, no matter its bluster.

It appears doubtful an agreement will be reached through the multilateral talks. Although Washington’s North Korea strategy is based on the Six-Party framework more so than its allies, direct talks with Pyongyang cannot and should not be avoided. Indeed, the United States is the only government not to be engaging in a vigorous bilateral dialogue with North Korea. Secretary Rice indicated in the March 20 press conference in Seoul that bilateral talks between the US and North Korea would be possible within the context of the Six-Party Talks.³³ This subtle change of tone fueled speculation in Seoul that Washington may accept dialogue rather than pressure is necessary to create an appropriate atmosphere for the next round of talks. Alternatively, the changed tone may derive from the Bush team’s reali-

³¹ International Crisis Group, “North Korea: Where Next for the Nuclear Talks,” November 15, 2004, available at www.icg.org.

³² Jack Pritchard, “The New Administration and the North Korean Nuclear Issue.”

³³ “Rice Delivers Positive Attitude,” *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 21, 2005.

zation of the policy divide with its Six-Party allies. Secretary Rice's assertions during her Northeast Asia trip that North Korea's "isolation from its neighbors has deepened" in the midst of the ongoing crisis and that the five parties had a "unity of message and purpose" with regard to North Korea smacked of surrealism more than reality.³⁴ With the exception of Japan, economic ties between North Korea and its neighbors have flourished since the outbreak of the current crisis in 2002.³⁵

For President Bush, a unified front with the other four parties is the only way to diplomatically resolve the nuclear situation. The fraying of the Six-Party framework may explain Washington's slight moderation. President Bush expressed a newfound patience for bringing the North back to the multilateral talks days after his Secretary of State repeatedly expressed her impatience and two days after North Korea declared that it further bolstered its nuclear arsenal.³⁶ The "patient President" made his comments at a time when officials in Washington warned that if Pyongyang did not return to the talks by June the US would pursue alternative measures, such as a sanctions resolution with the UN Security Council. Even Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, among other hard-line conservatives, are said to be growing impatient with the North Koreans.³⁷ President Bush may have therefore recognized that for the Six-Party framework to function, the US must be more sensitive to the positions and concerns of the other parties, however temporarily.

The possibility of an enlightened Bush policy, however, seems

³⁴ Glenn Kessler, "In Asia, Rice Says North Korea More Isolated From Neighbors," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2005.

³⁵ See ICG report "North Korea: Can the Iron Fist Embrace the Invisible Hand?," April 25, 2005, available at www.icg.org.

³⁶ Transcript, "News Conference with Leaders of US, Mexico, and Canada," *New York Times*, March 23, 2005.

³⁷ Brinkley, "Visiting Korea Base, Rice Sends Forceful Reminder to the North."

overly optimistic. Washington's moderation must be followed by serious engagement with North Korea. Despite the interests of its allies, regime change/collapse (the Arafat model) or capitulation (the Libyan model) remain the only real options for North Korea being considered by the Bush Administration. It is foolish to base policy on the eminent collapse of North Korea. One of the leaders of the collapse school, the American Enterprise Institute's Nicholas Eberstadt, has been "predicting" the collapse of North Korea for 15 years. Faith-based foreign policy will not resolve the crisis. The unified message to the Bush team must be clear:

- This crisis will not be solved until Washington decides to take ownership and directly deal with North Korea
- There will be no settlement until Pyongyang is convinced that Washington will give up seeking or hoping for its downfall. If a diplomatic solution is to be found, Washington must abandon any underlying goals of regime change.

View from Pyongyang: What Will It Take to Get North Korea Back to the Table?

Although Washington insists it has no plans to attack the North, Pyongyang is convinced Bush's underlying goal is regime change and will not earnestly engage in talks until these fears are put to rest. When North Korean Prime Minister Pak Pong-Ju told his Chinese counterpart in late March that Pyongyang really had not abandoned the Six-Party Talks, he stated North Korea would return to the negotiations if conditions were right. Premier Pak repeated the North's call on Washington to abandon its "hostile policy" to allow negotiations to resume. Many in Washington are convinced this oft-mentioned phrase is a diplomatic ploy to stall Pyongyang's return to the negotiating table, while placing the pressure back on Washington.

However, there could be significant meaning in the "hostile

policy” term to which Washington should pay attention to. Pyongyang is not just asking for economic and security assurances (e.g. that the US will not invade), but also assurances that the regime will last beyond the end of the nuclear program. In early March, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry issued a memorandum on the Six-Party Talks that articulated their fears and requirements of the US.³⁸ It declared that the key to the resolution of the nuclear issue lay in the United States “changing its hostile policy to a policy of peaceful North Korea-US coexistence... Unless the United States has the political intention to change its policy and coexist with US, the nuclear issue can never be resolved.” The memorandum refers to President Bush’s inaugural address announcing an end to tyranny and the declared US agenda of spreading freedom and democracy in the world as proof of Bush’s real intention to overthrow the North.

Despite Washington’s security assurances, North Korea believes that the Bush Administration intends the North Korean regime to *be collapsed*. Aside from conventional military threats, North Korea fears the United State’s non-military threats to the North’s existence, which it considers illustrates the Bush Administration’s true intention to undermine the Kim Jong Il regime. The memorandum cites the 2004 North Korea Human Rights Act as “the act of financially and materially ensuring system overthrow.” The Proliferation Security Initiative, among other diplomatic measures, is identified as further proof of Washington’s regime change intent. To North Korea, the US is buying time with the Six-Party Talks in order to exert non-military and indirect pressure on Pyongyang - while Bush seeks systematic change in North Korea, the United States “had no desire for full-fledged negotiations.”³⁹ At the same time, it must be recognized that

³⁸ DPRK Foreign Ministry, “Memorandum on 6-Party Talks,” Foreign Broadcast Information Service, March 4, 2005.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

even the most sincere overture will fail if the North has concluded that its nuclear capability is no longer a bargaining chip but instead a key source of the regime's capacity to survive.

Conclusion

The new paradigm demands a more realistic policy for dealing with North Korea's nuclear program and ending the litany of rhetoric directed at the North. Pragmatism must triumph over rhetoric and ideology. The Bush Administration must therefore negotiate with the North and agree to coexist. This radical departure would mirror another Republican maverick president who took a momentous step against his conventional wisdom that led to greater peace and prosperity in the region: Richard Nixon's engagement with China. It will not be easy for Bush, a man who "loathes" Kim Jong Il and who is no favorite of Pyongyang. To do otherwise, waiting for or encouraging Pyongyang to collapse will waste time and could result in utter disaster and chaos in the region.

Aside from declaring intent to coexist with Pyongyang, Washington must temper its human rights campaign and freedom agenda with regard to North Korea and remove the indirect pressures and "behind the scenes" efforts to subvert the North Korean regime. Furthermore, Washington and its Six-Party allies must address Pyongyang's economic difficulties in a comprehensive manner. This could mean that any final settlement would require a pledge by all parties to help the regime with food, energy assistance, and economic development projects to move North Korea into a post-nuclear era. Assisting the present regime entails temporarily sacrificing the principles of democracy and human rights to secure a nuclear-free Peninsula. Given the unimaginable devastation a war would bring, the price is worth paying, as such a settlement could finally bring North Korea back into

the fold of the international community. Such a settlement would work only if it included both incentives and disincentives to hold Pyongyang accountable to any agreement that is reached, and if South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan acknowledge their stake in assuring the North's compliance to the agreement. North Korea's abysmal human rights record will have to be dealt with in time, but the priority of the Six-Party members must be ending Pyongyang's nuclear escapade.

Any discussion on the nuclear issue is not complete without questioning whether North Korea is really willing to give up its nuclear programs. This is North Korea's only bargaining chip, which ensures Pyongyang the world's attention. North Korea's sense of vulnerability must be taken into account in the negotiations to deliver a final and sustainable settlement.

Washington, the most skeptical Six-Party member, has the farthest to go for such a settlement to be reached. To rescue the Six-Party framework from failure, the Bush Administration must craft policy that embraces the perceptions and priorities of the other four governments with regard to North Korea. Moreover, Washington must decide to seriously negotiate with Pyongyang rather than wait at the diplomatic sidelines for other parties to bring North Koreans to the table.

Ultimately, the only way to break out of the current deadlock and bridge the ever-widening gap between Washington and Pyongyang may have to be found outside the Six-Party Talks framework. Given that the other parties place the nuclear issue of secondary importance to other concerns, an internal or external catalyst may be necessary. An internal catalyst would take the form of a special high-level envoy appointed by President Bush, such as Bush's father, former President George Bush, much as former President Jimmy Carter served this role during the first nuclear crisis in 1994. However, given Bush's antipathy to Kim Jong Il, this may be unrealistic. Instead, a third

country may be needed, much as the United Kingdom served as a covert go-between for the United States and Libya before a breakthrough came in 2003. If a country were to step forward to play this role, the Bush Administration might respond favorably. If not, we can expect the North Korean nuclear crisis to continue to deepen.