

# *The Second Bush Administration and North Korea*

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## **Abstract**

We cannot neglect the fact that already a year has gone past since the previous session of the Six-Party Talks. Because of North Korea's continued refusal to participate in a fourth session, the onetime momentum of the Six-Party Talks naturally has vanished. The U.S. tolerance might have come close on its limit, but even that Bush administration has no intention whatever of putting an end to the Six-Party Talks at present. No progress in real terms can be expected even if Pyongyang accepted holding a fourth session. Thus the negotiation may roll back into exactly the same state in which it had started. It is hard to imagine the United States would engage itself in direct talks with North Korea. The Bush Administration also would not take drastic measures, such as using military strength or carrying out economic sanctions, until Iraq at the very least becomes politically stable. While asking China to put pressure, the United States, within this year, will not be going to send the stalemated North Korean problem to the UN Security Council. However, North Korea will push nuclear development forward quietly under the closed environment, if the status quo continues.

**Key Words:** Six-Party Talks, the Bush Administration, North Korea, North Korea's nuclear program, Japan's role

Emphasizing the American mission of opposing tyrants President George W. Bush's second term inaugural address on January 20, 2005 reached Pyongyang as a hostile message, redoubling their alertness. To North Korea, passages in the address jarred their nerves, as if the second Bush Administration were scheming a split or collapse of North Korea:

“The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.... So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.... We do not accept the existence of permanent tyranny because we do not accept the possibility of permanent slavery. Liberty will come to those who love it....

“Today, America speaks anew to the peoples of the world: All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.... The rulers of outlaw regimes can know that we still believe as Abraham Lincoln did: ‘Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it.’”

Although the president himself did not mention any tyrannical state in the address, Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State nominee had identified six “outposts of tyranny,” including North Korea, during her confirmation hearing of January 18 before the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate. The strong Bush warning was undoubtedly directed to the six countries. For North Korea, his address only heightened feelings of insecurity.

On August 18, 2004, at a gathering in Wisconsin on his election campaign tour, Bush denounced North Korea, calling Kim Jong Il a “tyrant.” This came as a great shock to Pyongyang, and formed one of the motives for withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks, which were scheduled to resume at the end of September. The frequent use of the word “tyranny” in the inaugural address was immediately linked to the term “tyrant.”

After the U.S. presidential election, North Korea waited, hoping for a change in policies of the second Bush Administration, ending the previous inflexible die-hard mentality. Rice's testimony and Bush's inaugural address seemed to suggest the policy line of the second term will be in the same mould of the first. Pyongyang must have realized how tough the American "neo-conservatives" are on North Korea.

Despite taking a hard-line, the second Bush Administration appears unlikely to demand immediate regime change in North Korea. In his inaugural address, Bush assertively declared that "the great objective of ending tyranny is the concentrated work of generations," adding "this is not primarily the task of arms." As long as the Bush Administration has no intention of seeking regime change, North Korea's response will remain prudent.

### **Bush's Second Term Policy towards North Korea**

Colin L. Powell's departure as Secretary of State is one of the key indicators of the second Bush Administration's North Korea policy. The Administration's discreet coordinator has left office, possibly taking with him what little flexibility the United States could show in dealing with North Korea. Although US North Korea policy in the first four years was so strict that it constantly refused any deals, a comparatively flexible response did occasionally emerge in negotiations over minor matters. For example, in the first round of the Six-Party Talks held at the end of August 2003, the representative of the United States expressed "three No's" as follows: "The United States does not threaten the DPRK. The United States does not intend to attack or invade the DPRK. Regime change is not an objective of the United States." He also said that, if the process of verified dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons program began, the United States would provide technical assistance. "The Nunn-Lugar program is

worth studying,” he suggested. Moreover, on October 19, 2003, when Bush met with Chinese President Hu Jintao, he presented some expanded ideas of the type of security assurances the United States might be able to offer North Korea.

Since these comparatively flexible approaches are believed to have been the product of Colin Powell’s hard efforts in guiding the U.S. diplomacy, that flexibility will be lost in the second term. Condoleezza Rice omitted any mention of regime change restraint - the subject of greatest importance to Pyongyang - while explicitly referring to “no intended aggression or attack” by the United States.

Secondly, the bottom-up policy making style in Washington is likely to change to a top-down type. Colin Powell listened to the views of working-level officials before going to the President for his decisions. This was the standard pattern of approach in the past four years, but new Secretary of State Rice will not follow in Powell’s footsteps. She will probably hear Bush’s decision first and send it down to her officials in different posts. In that case, Rice will basically play the role of translating Bush’s instincts into practical foreign policies, which will inevitably reflect his personal dislike of North Korean National Defense Chairman Kim Jong Il.

Thus, the North Korea policy in the second term of Bush Administration may have an inflexible unyielding nature that does not deviate from a hard-line stance. Nevertheless, Washington will avoid applying so much pressure that military tensions are raised on the Korean Peninsula.

The United States is now tied down in Iraq and unable to take the risk of war over the North Korean nuclear issue. 150,000 troops are deployed in Iraq and another 33,000 in Kuwait, which must be rotated frequently. The U.S. Army even uses its Second Infantry Division stationed in South Korea as a source of replacements. A war on the Korean Peninsula should require a minimum of 100,000 troops more

than those already stationed, Washington cannot take any action that may lead to the use of military force against North Korea.

When applying decisive pressure, it is generally considered essential to have a worst-case scenario in which the threat of war is considered one of the possible consequences, even though there is initially no intention to use such a last resort. In 1994, for instance, the United States moved to impose economic sanctions on North Korea. Pyongyang responded with the saber-rattling threat that it would interpret the enforcement of sanctions as a declaration of war. The United States took this threat seriously and prepared itself to repulse a North Korean military assault while it maintained the drive for sanctions. Even the Democratic Administration of President Bill Clinton could not neglect this possibility.

The same applies to the current Bush Administration, which realizes that even if it has no intention of striking North Korea preemptively, imposing sanctions may lead to a military clash and that it cannot apply pressure unless it is prepared to deal with this sort of response. The situation in Iraq thus makes it impossible for the United States to cope with the threat of military response. The situation in Iraq therefore effectively precludes the United States from moving against Pyongyang. Even after the Iraqi situation has settled, the militarily awkward US position will continue until the Pentagon is able to substantially reduce the number of its troops in the Middle East.

Although the second Bush Administration persists with a hard line on North Korea, all hardliners are not necessarily in favor of military action. The United States will not be prepared to conduct military action for a long time. Even if Pyongyang continues to refuse to join the fourth round of Six-Party Talks and the United States refers the North Korean nuclear problem to the United Nations, Washington will not apply decisive pressure to force the North to comply with its demands.

This remains true only if North Korea refrains from any of the following four unacceptable actions:

- Selling nuclear weapons or materials to other countries, particularly if they pass into the hands of international terrorist organizations
- Conducting nuclear tests
- Launching long-range ballistic missiles
- Provoking South Korea with its conventional military forces.

Even in these cases, the United States will continue to make every effort to avoid a military confrontation.

### **Continued Nuclear Development Program in North Korea**

While the United States remains bound to Iraqi affairs, North Korea appears to have not only judged that an agreement such as the one concluded with the previous Clinton Administration cannot be reached with the Bush Administration, but has determined to go continue nuclear arms development until it is able to negotiate with the United States. The DPRK Foreign Ministry statement of February 10, 2005 stressed the reasons for this choice:

“First, we wanted the Six-Party Talks, but we will inevitably suspend participation in the Six-Party Talks for an indefinite period until it is recognized that the justification for participating in the talks has been made and that ample conditions and atmosphere have been created for us to expect results from the talks.”

“Second, now that the United States has clearly disclosed the attempt to by all means eliminate our system by wielding a nuclear stick, we will take a measure to increase the nuclear weapons arsenal in order to defend the ideology, system, freedom, and democracy chosen by our people.... We have already resolutely withdrawn from the NPT and have manufactured nuclear weapons for self-defense to cope with the Bush Administration’s policy of isolating and crushing the DPRK, which is becoming stronger. Our nuclear weapons will remain a self-defensive nuclear deterrent under any circumstances.”

The North's will to indefinitely suspend participation in the Six-Party Talks and continue the nuclear weapon development program was clear in this statement. Nevertheless, the attention of the majority of the international community has focused on the first open admission of nuclear weapon manufacture. The suspension of participation in the Six-Party Talks came a distant second. As a result, the continuation of the nuclear weapons development program in North Korea - the issue about which the world is most concerned - was almost ignored.

Pyongyang's effort to expand the nuclear weapons arsenal has some serious implications. North Korea currently claims an arsenal of manufactured plutonium-based nuclear weapons. "Increase the nuclear weapons arsenal," therefore, indicates a new arsenal of uranium-based nuclear weapons in addition to the one already in possession. "A measure to increase the nuclear weapons arsenal" may refer to highly enriched uranium production for nuclear warheads.

Over the past four years, North Korea has repeatedly voiced its strong preference for face-to-face direct talks with the United States, but the Foreign Ministry statement seemed to convey a combination of disappointment and irritation over the US attitude:

"We have shown all the magnanimity and tolerance we could during the last four years since the inauguration of the Bush Administration. Now we cannot spend another four years like this, but there is no need to return to the starting point again and repeat [what we did] for the [next] four years, either."

By all appearances, North Korea for a while would not take the policy of provoking the United States into "bargaining via direct talks," for the international community can easily sense such provocative acts as conducting nuclear tests, launching ballistic missiles, or extracting weapons-grade plutonium.

There is a possibility, on the other hand, that Pyongyang may continue to develop highly enriched uranium, which can be undertaken

in relative secrecy without directly irritating the international community. The eventual goal of the enrichment program is to develop nuclear missiles.

In general terms, uranium-based nuclear weapons are easier to miniaturize than plutonium-based weapons. They are therefore more suitable for producing missile warheads. In May 1998, Pakistan reportedly tested uranium-based nuclear weapons six times in three days, having successfully miniaturized the device. It became a de facto nuclear missile state soon after surviving the storm of criticism. North Korea is well aware of Pakistan's experience. It would not be surprising if North Korea wished to follow the same path as Pakistan.

There are no precise estimates of the North Korean uranium enrichment capability. Although it remains unknown whether the North holds low enriched uranium (LEU) or highly enriched uranium (HEU), the possibility remains that the North may obtain sufficient HEU for a nuclear test within one to two years if the following conditions are met:

- North Korea refrains from provoking the United States
- The North maintains good relations with China and South Korea
- The North receives continuous aid from both China and South Korea
- China and South Korea continue to oppose economic sanctions against DPRK.

For these reasons, blocking North Korea's nuclear weapons development - especially HEU weapons development program - is the primary task facing the international community. Unfortunately, there appears no sense of global urgency. For example, the US-Japan Joint Statement released on February 19, 2005 in the name of the Japanese Foreign Minister and the US Secretary of State passed the following simple remark:



“The Ministers agreed that the statement by the DPRK only further isolates it from the international community and runs counter to efforts by the parties concerned to peacefully resolve the nuclear issue through the Six-Party Talks.”

As has been pointed out, the essence of North Korea’s Foreign Ministry statement was the apparent will of the Pyongyang government to continue development of nuclear weapons. A sense of urgency among the U.S. and Japanese governments is clearly lacking in the US-Japan Joint Statement on North Korea.

In solving the problem, time is no ally. The international community, not North Korea, is standing at the crossroads. Although pressure may be applied to North Korea to prevent nuclear materials proliferating to other countries and terrorist groups, North Korea’s nuclear capability cannot be neglected.

### **North Korea’s Controlled Threat**

In April 2005, Pyongyang took several steps toward gaining weapons-grade plutonium. The 5 MWe reactor was shut down after operating for two years. Then, on May 11, a spokesman for the DPRK Foreign Ministry announced the complete removal of the 8,000 spent fuel rods from the reactor. The statement also contained the first clear expression of intent to resume construction of the 50 MWe and 200 MWe reactors that hitherto had been suspended since 1995. These provocative measures only increase allied fears. Some analysts have argued the North Korea threat has risen.

The threat, however, still remains in the “controlled” stages. Even if North Korea had truly unloaded the 8,000 nuclear spent fuel rods as it claimed, it would require at least a further 9 months to produce any weapons-grade plutonium. The spent rods take a minimum of 3 months to cool and 6 months to reprocess at the

Yongbyon facility operating at full-capacity to extract the largest possible amount of weapons-grade plutonium. In reality, these processes would probably take far longer. North Korea will therefore not gather new weapons-grade plutonium earlier than the summer of 2006.

There is another option for North Korea. As they have not yet declared the commencement of reprocessing, they still can choose to leave the spent fuel rods in cooling ponds for one year or two (or longer), which will further postpone the acquisition of additional weapons-grade plutonium. This would reduce international community fears.

If the construction of the 50 MWe and 200 MWe reactors were actually resumed, construction would take at least a few years to complete, around 2 years to operate the reactors and unload the spent fuel rods, and around another year to extract weapons-grade plutonium. Thus, a minimum of 5 years would elapse before North Korea gained weapons-grade plutonium from the new reactors. There is therefore little possibility that North Korea will remarkably increase the amount of weapons-grade plutonium in its possession within the term of Bush Administration. North Korea can therefore be considered a “controlled” threat. Both the United States and the international community have strong concerns, but no sense of urgency.

To put it differently, there is sufficient time and opportunities remaining to make North Korea relinquish its nuclear program. Such analysis and evaluation seems to support the efforts of the other nations planning to resume the Six-Party Talks.

A year has already passed since the previous session of the Six-Party Talks. Because North Korea continues to refuse to participate in a fourth session, the former momentum of the Six-Party Talks has vanished. US tolerance may be pushed close to its limit, but even the Bush Administration has no intention of permanently ending the Six-Party Talks at present. In fact, in the 28 April 2005 press con-

ference in which Bush created a stir by calling Kim Jong Il a “tyrant,” he reaffirmed the importance of Six-Party Talks for the United States. For the time being, the Bush Administration is likely to concentrate on asking Beijing to use its leverage on Pyongyang, while occasionally alluding to the possibility of referring the issue to the UN Security Council.

The actions of the Bush Administration in and after March 2005 make these intentions evident. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, during her round of visits to Japan, South Korea, and China in mid-March, not only refrained from again naming North Korea as an outpost of tyranny but publicly declared it a “sovereign state.” It seemed Washington wanted to give the impression of assuming flexibility towards North Korea as well as helping China act as intermediary.

The DPRK Foreign Ministry statement of February 10, 2005 proclaimed an indefinite halt to its participation in the Six-Party Talks and the resumption of nuclear weapons development. Since then, China has employed positive persuasion to encourage the Kim Jong Il government to reconsider this choice. Furthermore, it has asked the Bush Administration to show a flexible attitude towards North Korea. In response to the US plea for economic pressure on North Korea, the Chinese government has indicated there is a limit to what Chinese could do to North Koreans.

In response, the Bush Administration has displayed a more flexible attitude towards North Korea, while reiterating the same pressure request to Beijing. Rice’s statements and attitude during the tour of Asian countries as Secretary of State were based on such a diplomatic concept.

Similarly, in May 2005 China sided with North Korea and pressed Washington to accept Pyongyang offer to reopen the New York channel. The Bush Administration eventually revived the channel on May 13, after an interval of around six months. By reopening the

channel as China recommended, the United States believed it might be able to change DPRK minds. If North Korea was unlikely to come back to the Six-Party Talks, letting Beijing invest exhaustive efforts before shifting discussion to the UN Security Council probably motivated the Bush Administration.

In real terms, no progress can be expected even if Pyongyang accepts a fourth session. Since the end of March 2005, North Korea has continued to claim that the Six-Party Talks should be turned into disarmament talks. Pyongyang argues that to dismantle the nuclear weapons program, the United States must remove all nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula and the region, stop military exercises, and agree on normalizing relations with North Korea. There is no possibility Washington will comply with such demands. The North Korean delegation will therefore probably again refuse to return to the Six-Party Talks.

Thus, the negotiations may roll back into exactly the same state in which it had started. It is hard to imagine the United States would engage itself in direct talks with North Korea. The Bush Administration would also not take drastic measures, such as using military force or engaging economic sanctions, at least until Iraq becomes politically stable. While asking China to apply pressure, the United States will not send the stalemated North Korean problem to the UN Security Council in 2005. Meanwhile, North Korea will quietly push nuclear development forward if the status quo continues.

### **Suggested Roles for Japan**

In the past it was generally considered that North-South reconciliation was the most important element to building peace on the Korean Peninsula and, once reconciliation was achieved, military tensions on the Peninsula would recede. These ideas are now gone. A

certain degree of reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula has not resulted in definite peace or decreased military tensions. The structure of confrontation still exists on the Peninsula.

Reconciliation is certainly in progress between the North and South Koreans. A decade ago it was unimaginable that dialogue and cooperation, as well as interpersonal exchanges in cultural and sports areas would occur so frequently. During the four years after the first North-South Korea Summit in June 2000, ministerial and Red Cross talks were held periodically, and railroad and road connections have been established. The construction and growth of Kaesong Industrial Complex has taken shape. The two Koreas are in the process of a “maintainable and stable relational improvement” as President Roh Moo-hyun stated. This is a major change of situation, considering how much attention was formerly applied to the question of how to realize a dialogue between the North and the South.

The easing of North-South military tensions, on the other hand, has made little progress. North Korea is largely to blame for this state. The North has facilitated dialogues, exchanges, and cooperation with the South and no longer refuses economic aid. It has, however, never concurred with the South on the matters of arms control and disarmament.

North Korea’s primary fear is the military power of the United States. No matter how its relations with South Korea are improved, North Korea is unlikely to reduce its military forces until relations with the United States improve and the US military threat reduced.

The military forces of North Korea have actually increased in the past 10 years. The North’s ballistic missile capability has risen steadily, and Pyongyang resumed the nuclear weapons program in December 2002. The weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability of North Korea have certainly been upgraded.

Interestingly, during this time, South Korean society has gradually

come to recognize the North Korean military threat. That is, fears about the North's military threat were slightly on the decline among South Koreans, and an atmosphere for a relatively stable "peaceful coexistence" with the northern half of the Peninsula was created in the South.

However, the WMD capability of North Korea is no doubt a threat to peace and security of Northeast Asia. Unless the North gives up WMD, especially its nuclear ambitions, there will be no permanent peace, even if the North and the South maintain their "continuous and stable relational improvement."

For peace of the Korean Peninsula, the North must abandon nuclear weapons. North Korea has a limited, though not negligible, nuclear capability, and Pyongyang continues to develop this nuclear capability with the 5 MWe nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. If the fuel is reloaded and reprocessed, there will be sufficient plutonium for one or two additional weapons. The North is estimated to already possess one or two devices, plus an accumulation of weapons-grade plutonium suitable to manufacture six or seven nuclear weapons.

All other countries in Northeast Asia including Japan, South Korea, China, Russia, and the United States have implicitly admitted the existence of North Korea's limited capability, by deciding to live with a "nuclear-armed North Korea" for the time being. The strategic environment of Northeast Asia has been completely changed by North Korea's nuclear development program.

Terminating North Korea's nuclear development requires a mix of policies - a combination of pressure-based and incentive-based approaches, and all the countries concerned should collaborate and act in concert to change Pyongyang's policies.

Considering North Korea's increasing dependence on aid, China and South Korea as sources of economic support can both apply pressure on Pyongyang by reducing or temporarily suspending their aid

projects.

Japan and the United States, on the other hand, can provide valuable incentives. Pyongyang will consider any commitments such as security assurances useless unless they are endorsed by the United States. Japan is also the only nation capable of providing large-scale economic assistance. Japan and the United States must therefore offer North Korea incentives.

This approach is the best available mix of policies with multiple intent and effectiveness. In reality, however, each pair of nations plays the contrary role. The countries suitable to apply pressure try to provide incentives. Neither China nor South Korea wants to replace their carrots with sticks, while Japan and the United States pressure the North instead of offering incentives. Herein lays the reason for the failure of the current system of negotiation.

If it can move beyond the abduction issue, Japan can contribute to the process and tackle the nuclear issue. The close bond between Japan and the United States allows them to present incentives in another way. When trying to persuade North Korea to terminate its disruptive behavior, for instance, Japan can offer a comprehensive and attractive proposal on condition that North Korea must yield on all the points claimed by Japan and the United States, such as nuclear development, missiles, and abductions.

As a comprehensive resolution advocated by Tokyo and Washington, Japan can assure North Korea that such a resolution would, at the very least, enable normalized relations and huge economic aid. At the same time, Japan can encourage the United States to normalize relations with North Korea.

All concerned parties must work together to find the best blend of pressure and incentives. This task is very difficult and failure or success is dependent on how Japan acts in the group. Japan must provide the necessary incentives and engage in normalization talks

with North Korea while participating in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Illicit Activity Initiative (IAI). Japan therefore has tremendous significance over the North Korean nuclear issue and must pull its weight for peace and stability in the region.