

North Korea pulls out of nuclear talks

Peter Symonds
14 February 2005

North Korea effectively scuttled attempts to restart six-party talks on its nuclear programs with a statement last Thursday declaring that it had “manufactured nukes for self-defence” and was suspending participation in negotiations “for an indefinite period”. No date had been set for a new round of talks involving China, Russia, Japan and South Korea, as well as the US and North Korea, but Washington had been pressing for an early resumption and a tougher line on Pyongyang.

While it had previously hinted at building up a “nuclear deterrence”, last week’s declaration was the first time North Korea has explicitly declared it has nuclear weapons. The claim cannot, of course, be confirmed. North Korea has the means for extracting plutonium from spent fuel rods, and may well have done so, after pulling out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2002. The US claims that North Korea has enough plutonium to construct six to eight nuclear bombs, but Pyongyang has not, to date, tested a nuclear weapon.

The international media has focussed exclusively on the “threat” posed by North Korea, but the reality is that Pyongyang has every reason to fear that it could be the target of US aggression, particularly following the invasion of Iraq. In 2002, Bush branded North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, an “axis of evil”. Since then, Washington has demanded that Pyongyang dismantle its nuclear facilities, refused to enter into bilateral talks and dismissed North Korea’s call for a mutual non-aggression pact. While talking of a “diplomatic solution”, US officials have not ruled out “the military option”.

In its statement last week, Pyongyang pointed out that “regime change” remains Washington’s objective in North Korea. “The true intention of the second-term Bush administration is not only to continue its policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK [North Korea] pursued during the first-term [in] office but to escalate it,” it declared, adding: “There is no justification for us to participate in the six party talks again given that the Bush administration termed the DPRK, a dialogue partner, an ‘outpost of tyranny’”.

The US response has been remarkably low-key. Presidential spokesman Scott McClellan dismissively declared: “We’ve heard this kind of rhetoric from North Korea before.” US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described Pyongyang’s decision to pull out of talks as “an unfortunate move” that would “deepen North Korea’s isolation from the international community.” US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld cast

doubt on North Korea’s claims to have nuclear weapons, saying: “They’ve indicated other things from time to time that haven’t proved out.”

These subdued comments are in marked contrast to Washington’s stance on Iraq and Iran. On the basis of unsubstantiated allegations about Iran’s nuclear programs, the second-term Bush administration is adopting an increasingly bellicose attitude. In the case of Iraq, the US illegally occupied the country on the basis of outright lies about Iraqi WMDs. Yet when Pyongyang publicly states that it has nuclear weapons, White House officials declare that it is probably bluffing.

Its response to North Korea’s statement underscores the fact that Washington’s objectives have nothing to do with so-called weapons of mass destruction, or ending “tyranny”. These are simply pretexts for the US to use its military muscle to establish its predominance in key strategic areas of the globe. Unlike Iraq and Iran, North Korea has no oil reserves. But it is a potential source of very cheap labour and is strategically located next to China, South Korea and Japan. US bellicosity has already stymied South Korea’s Sunshine Policy that aimed to open North Korea as a source of cheap labour and a potential transport route between North East Asia and Europe.

By insisting on multilateral talks, the US has been able to ensure that its economic and strategic interests in the region remain paramount. The implicit threat of American military action, which would have catastrophic consequences for North Korea’s neighbours, especially South Korea, China and Japan, has been used to pressure other parties to the negotiations to toe the US line. The Bush administration has insisted that China use its influence to help bully North Korea into attending the talks and accepting US terms.

The present crisis erupted in 2002 when Washington claimed that North Korean officials had admitted privately to having a secret uranium enrichment program. Despite Pyongyang’s public denials, the Bush administration terminated the 1994 Agreed Framework, under which North Korea agreed to freeze and ultimately dismantle its existing nuclear programs in return for supplies of fuel oil, the construction of two lightwater power reactors and the normalisation of relations.

Throughout the 1990s, right-wing Republicans condemned the Clinton administration for signing the Agreed Framework and accused North Korea of having a nuclear weapons program. After being installed in office in 2000, Bush

immediately froze relations with North Korea. Following a protracted policy review, the White House announced a list of new demands on Pyongyang, indicating a far more aggressive approach. The 2002 allegations became the pretext for cutting off fuel oil supplies and halting construction on the lightwater reactors—work that had barely begun even though the completion date was 2003.

North Korea reacted by pulling out of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and restarting its nuclear facilities. Pyongyang has repeatedly declared that it was willing to reach a deal with Washington over its nuclear programs in exchange for a formal mutual non-aggression pact. The White House dismissed these offers out of hand and refused to negotiate directly, insisting that it would not “reward bad behaviour”.

Under pressure from China, North Korea agreed to six-party talks, which began in August 2003. At the third round in June 2004, US negotiators unveiled a draft agreement that placed onerous new obligations on North Korea in return for resumed fuel oil supplies and vague promises of a future security assurance. Embroiled in a deepening crisis in Iraq, the US offer was designed, at least in part, to defuse the issue prior to the US presidential elections. North Korea, however, refused to take part in a fourth round of talks, scheduled for last September.

In the aftermath of the American elections, the Bush administration has pushed the resumption of talks to pressure North Korea to accept the one-sided US deal. To maximise pressure on Pyongyang, fresh allegations about its nuclear activities surfaced early this month in the US media. These have all the hallmarks of the lies used to justify the invasion of Iraq. US officials claimed to have evidence that a canister of uranium hexafluoride (UF6)—the precursor required for uranium enrichment—found in Libya came from North Korea.

According to an article in the *New York Times* on February 2, US specialists from the Department of Energy had determined with “near certainty that North Korea sold processed uranium to Libya.” The so-called evidence cited was from unnamed sources and circumstantial. The scientists claimed that the presence of traces of plutonium and the combination of uranium isotopes in the sample amounted to “a fingerprint” demonstrating that the UF6 had come from North Korea.

Even if true, the claim only indicated that North Korea had a facility for producing UF6—a relatively straightforward process. It is a far more complex technical task to build a system of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium, especially to the level required for manufacturing nuclear weapons. Libya had not solved the problem before it opened up its nuclear programs to international inspection. The US has provided no evidence that North Korea has either.

In fact, the sensationalised allegation itself was completely misleading, as an article in the *Washington Post* on February 3 made clear. The report pointed out that IAEA scientists had carried out similar tests on the Libyan UF6 and decided that the

evidence was inconclusive. They found no plutonium traces and had no uranium samples from North Korea or Pakistan (another possible supplier) with which to compare isotope “fingerprints”. Moreover, even if the uranium came from North Korea, it was not possible to determine whether the UF6 had been manufactured there.

David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security, told the *Washington Post* that it was not possible to exclude the possibility that the UF6 came from Pakistan. “What amazes me is why this is coming out now, and the timing has to make one suspicious that the information is being used to pressure allies to take a tougher line with North Korea,” he said.

At the same time as the *New York Times* article appeared, the Bush administration dispatched two senior US National Security Agency officials—Michael Green and William Tobey—to Asia to discuss the “evidence” with the Japanese, South Korean and Chinese governments. Beijing, in particular, which has a formal defence alliance with Pyongyang, is being pressured by the US to take a tougher stance on North Korea. China is North Korea’s main trading partner and source of oil.

There is no doubt that Washington’s manoeuvres convinced North Korea that it had nothing to gain from another round of six-party talks. In his inaugural address, Bush vastly broadened the scope for future US provocations and aggression from the so-called terrorist “axis of evil” to a struggle against “tyranny” throughout the world. Pyongyang has clearly concluded that “regime change” remains the aim of the second Bush administration in North Korea. By deliberately stoking tensions on the Korean peninsula, Washington is recklessly setting in train processes that have potentially disastrous consequences.



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