

Bush Administration to Commit Seriously to Diplomacy with North Korea

By Jim Lobe | May 20, 2003

The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush should commit itself seriously to resolving the nuclear impasse with North Korea if only to line up support from regional states if stronger measures are needed, according to a new report by the influential Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). “The United States has not persuaded its regional partners that it is serious about negotiations, making efforts to secure their approval for a significantly tougher position difficult if not impossible,” according to the blue-ribbon CFR task force that issued the report, *Meeting the North Korean Nuclear Challenge*. “If negotiations fail or should U.S. intelligence confirm that North Korea has reprocessed spent fuel (for building nuclear weapons), it is uncertain whether our partners would be willing to put significantly greater pressure on North Korea,” the report continued, calling the current situation a “genuine crisis.”

Until now, the administration has been deeply split between hawks, centered primarily in the Pentagon, and pro-engagement forces led by the State Department, according to the task force, which was chaired by the former president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Ambassador Morton Abramowitz, and James Laney, ambassador to South Korea from 1993-97.

The result has been an inconsistent policy that has created confusion among Washington’s partners in the region, including South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia who “fear that the United States will attack North Korean nuclear facilities and unleash war on the peninsula.”

But Bush should now come down firmly in favor of serious diplomacy, according to the report, which also called for the appointment of a senior official assigned “full-time responsibility for co-ordinating U.S. policy, dealing with the allies, and negotiating with North Korea.”

The report, which echoes some of the major recommendations made in February by another task force sponsored by the Washington-based Center for International Policy and the Center for East Asian Studies of the University of Chicago, comes amid continuing uncertainty and concern about Pyongyang’s intentions.

On the eve of the first meeting between Bush and South Korea’s new president, Roh Moo Hyun at the White House last Wednesday, North Korea announced that it was renouncing its 1992 “de-nuclearization” pledge with South Korea. It was the latest move in a steady escalation that began last October when Pyongyang confirmed to a

U.S. negotiator that it had a secret program to make highly enriched uranium (HEU).

Since then, the North has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), asserted that it possesses nuclear weapons, and declared that it is reprocessing spent fuel from the Yongbyon nuclear plant whose operations were frozen under the 1994 “Agreed Framework” accord between Pyongyang and Washington. If true—something which U.S. intelligence agencies have been unable to confirm—Pyongyang could produce half a dozen nuclear bombs by year’s end.

That prospect is a nightmare for U.S. national security officials who believe that North Korea, which is desperate for foreign exchange, would be willing to sell the weapons to all comers, including terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda.

For its part, Pyongyang has insisted that U.S. nuclear and proliferation concerns could be fully addressed if Washington agreed to negotiate a new accord that included a non-aggression pact and a U.S. pledge not to hinder its efforts to obtain international assistance, including loans and credits from agencies such as the World Bank.

The result has been impasse. Washington has insisted it would make no new promises until Pyongyang permanently dismantled its HEU program and refroze the Yongbyon operation. It said it was prepared to talk with the North about how this could be achieved, but only in a multilateral context involving other regional powers.



North Korea, on the other hand, insisted that Washington provide security assurances up front, before it addressed the nuclear weapons programs, and that the talks be bilateral, rather than multilateral.

Last month, China overcame the procedural issue by hosting a “multilateral” meeting between it, Washington, and Pyongyang. While the talks broke the ice, the two sides only repeated their previous positions on substance.

No Progress in Negotiations

The failure to make progress, as well as Washington’s success in the war in Iraq, has reportedly strengthened administration hardliners, most importantly Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, in the ongoing debate about how to proceed. They appear convinced that Pyongyang will never give up its nuclear weapons program and thus favor a strategy of isolating the North politically and economically in hopes that it will collapse from within. Rumsfeld even circulated a memo last month that called for Washington to persuade China to cooperate in such a strategy, a notion dismissed as absurd by regional specialists.

Senior Pentagon officials have also suggested mounting a naval blockade of the North to prevent it from exporting fissile material, missiles, and illicit drugs, attacking Yongbyon and other suspected nuclear facilities in the North if reprocessing has indeed begun, and even “decapitating” the regime with targeted attacks as Washington tried to do in Iraq with its precision weapons. This last suggestion was raised by one anonymous official in an interview with the *New York Times* on the eve of last Wednesday’s White House meeting between Roh and Bush.

Regional Allies

The problem, according to the task force, is that Washington’s regional partners, including South Korea,

oppose tougher sanctions for fear that they could lead to war. On the other hand, according to the task force, they also oppose a “nuclear North Korea.”

“What our regional partners do agree on is that the United States should seriously negotiate with Pyongyang in hopes of reaching a peaceful resolution to the crisis, and, at the very least, test North Korean intentions,” the task force said. If such negotiations fail as a result of Pyongyang’s lack of good faith, at least Washington’s regional partners will be more inclined to support it in any confrontation of the kind the hawks are currently contemplating.

To accomplish all this, the task force called for further steps beyond last week’s summit to mend the alliance with South Korea that became badly frayed last fall: adoption of a unified U.S. policy under one official; resumption of “serious, early, and direct negotiations with North Korea,” preferably in a multilateral forum, but Washington should not exclude bilateral talks; and the development of a short-term proposal to test North Korean intentions.

Such a proposal should require North Korea to freeze its nuclear and reprocessing facilities, re-admit international inspectors, and account for any plutonium taken from Yongbyon in exchange for U.S. assurances that it will neither attack the North nor impede the flow of international assistance for as long as the interim agreement remains in effect. “The U.S. must be perceived as trying to resolve this problem peacefully,” Abramowitz said. “To do so, we have to mobilize allies and show we are prepared to reach a negotiated settlement.”

(Jim Lobe <jlobe@starpower.net> is a political analyst with Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He also writes regularly for Inter Press Service.)

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