

Six Countries in Search of a Solution

By John Feffer | August 26, 2003

War so far has not returned to the Korean peninsula. Negotiators from six countries—North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States—are about to sit down in Beijing to keep it that way. In a world dominated by military “solutions” to obdurate problems, even the muted vote for diplomacy represented by the upcoming Six-Party Talks should be cause for celebration.

But few are optimistic about this latest attempt to solve the current Korean crisis. Most pundits believe that the best possible outcome of the August 27-29 meetings would be a time and a date for the next parley. If one of the six doesn't storm out, the meeting will be a success. The United States has refused to offer any inducements; North Korea has not diminished its harsh rhetoric toward the United States. Japan, meanwhile, has insisted on introducing the issue of abductees, which may very well torpedo the discussions. Although South Korea, China, and Russia are eager for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue, they are the least influential of the six.

Good Cop, Bad Cop

The Bush administration has been playing it very coy, even trotting out a version of “good cop, bad cop.” So, as State Department hardliner John Bolton was blasting Kim Jong Il by name 41 times in a recent speech in Seoul, his more moderate colleague Richard Armitage was expressing grudging admiration for Kim as a “canny” poker player. Even as President Bush has repeatedly insisted on the importance of a diplomatic solution, senior Pentagon adviser James Woolsey advocated in the *Wall Street Journal* for a campaign of 4,000 daily air strikes against North Korea. And officials in Washington have floated rumors of the carrots they plan to wave at the talks in Beijing, namely a non-aggression pact and various economic incentives, only to have other officials categorically deny that “bad behavior” will ever be so rewarded.

Disagreements within the Bush Administration

Most recently, a rough compromise position has emerged: if other countries offer North Korea incentives to end its nuclear program, then the United

States will not object. It is difficult to say whether this is a true compromise between the faction in Washington that believes negotiations to be appeasement and the faction that predicts that a war will exact a terrible toll on human life and the president's electoral chances. At the heart of this disagreement within the administration are two issues: the underlying purpose of North Korea's nuclear program and the durability of the government in Pyongyang.

Victor Cha, a Korea specialist at Georgetown University, has argued that North Korea wants to add nuclear weapons permanently to its military arsenal rather than trade this bargaining chip for various goodies. According to this interpretation, negotiations are futile. Only sticks will compel North Korea to give up its nuclear deterrent. This argument, however, is circular. The various strategies that the United States has been pursuing to undermine the government in Pyongyang will only encourage North Korea to view its nuclear program more as a deterrent than a bargaining chip, which will only then necessitate harsher measures until the regime retaliates or finally collapses.

The Bush administration embarked on the regime change path based on a mixture of wishful thinking and unreliable defector testimony that was subsequently dismissed by the CIA. Thinking the Kim Jong Il regime on its last legs, the Bush administration backed away from the missile deal that the Clinton administration had almost negotiated in its final months. It refused to negotiate with an “evil” country and ignored potential compromises that emerged after the revelations concerning North Korea's uranium enrichment project in October 2002. More recently, the administration created the 11-nation Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) with the stated intention of restricting the trade in



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weapons of mass destruction through interdiction at sea and by air, though the underlying objective appears to be to shut down the North Korean economy. Hardliners have also considered inviting large numbers of North Korean migrants in China to seek asylum in the United States, with the hopes of stimulating an East German-style collapse. And still the regime in Pyongyang remains more-or-less intact.

Changes of Nuance

It might seem as though the moderate wing of the administration has gained an important victory over the regime change crowd by moving forward with the six-party talks. Indeed, a good deal of political capital has been expended to line up the players. On August 8, for instance, the Bush administration responded to Russian entreaties by declaring Chechen fighter Shamil Basayev an international terrorist. In what might be viewed as a quid pro quo, Russia recently participated in unprecedented military exercises with Japan and South Korea to prepare for possible government collapse in North Korea and an accompanying outflow of refugees. Washington has also lobbied hard with Beijing to turn the screws on its putative ally. With the Pentagon seriously overstretched and the U.S. public in no mood for another war so soon, the administration needs at least the appearance of flexibility. This is what the analysts in Washington call a “change of nuance,” which is apparently several notches down from a change of policy and perhaps only a shade above a change in spin.

However, while deal-making and diplomacy appear to be more prominent at the moment, the hardliners are by no means dormant. Washington and Tokyo are about to pull the plug on the most significant achievement of the Clinton engagement policy, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, which was to substitute two civilian nuclear reactors for North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. And PSI is gathering steam with a joint naval interdiction exercise scheduled for next month.

And so the Bush administration has yet to resolve its serious internal differences over North Korea policy. What might seem like a crafty strategy of carrot-and-stick is more likely infighting and incoherence. The hardliners likely believe that the current negotiations will not produce any viable solutions and are thus willing to bide their time. The Six Party Talks will probably not be diplomacy’s finest hour, for the Bush administration seems in no rush to work out a solution and, because of internal dissent, in no position to offer any significant inducements. However, with the stakes so high on the Korean peninsula, even half-hearted diplomacy is better than no diplomacy at all.

(John Feffer <johnfeffer@aol.com>, editor of Power Trip: U.S. Unilateralism and Global Strategy after September 11 (Seven Stories Press), writes regularly for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He is the author of the forthcoming North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis (Seven Stories Press).)

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