

The Tug of War

By John Feffer | October 22, 2003

The tug of war between the hawks and doves over North Korea policy continues within the Bush administration. In the latest move, the administration has unveiled its new, flexible negotiating position with Pyongyang: a willingness to provide security guarantees. Examined more carefully, however, this new dovish position appears to have the wing prints of the hawks all over it.

The current conflict between the two countries dates back to U.S. accusations of a hidden North Korean nuclear program one year ago. Pyongyang has been relentlessly pursuing a nuclear deterrent to prevent a U.S. attack and win back a measure of international status, lost as a result of famine and economic collapse. The Bush administration, meanwhile, has not hidden its desire for regime change. In addition to Bush's own personal antipathy toward North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, the administration has included North Korea as a target in the Nuclear Posture Review and a major threat in the Quadrennial Defense Review. It has ramped up containment measures in the region such as flying unmanned Shadow planes near the North Korean border. It has tightened economic screws by cutting humanitarian aid and restricting North Korean trade in military and non-military goods through the Proliferation Security Initiative. As if these actions weren't enough to convince Pyongyang, the example of the Iraq war demonstrated more than any declaration the administration's commitment to preemptive strikes and preventive war.

With its current initiative, the Bush administration has revealed not so much the flexibility of its position as the awkwardness. Though it would seem that Pyongyang has crossed several red lines—exiting the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, kicking out inspectors, announcing the successful reprocessing of plutonium—the administration hasn't attacked the country. Nor, on the other hand, has Washington pushed hard on the diplomatic front to resolve the crisis. The administration can't offer too much for fear of being labeled appeasers; but offering nothing, as it has so far, makes Bush seem asleep at the wheel. And thus

the genesis of this half-hearted attempt to lure North Korea back to the negotiating table.

While Washington has hitherto insisted that North Korea freeze its nuclear program before any negotiations can take place, Pyongyang has insisted on a bilateral treaty of non-aggression. Because they've seen what can happen when new administrations arrive in Washington, North Korean leaders want the U.S. Senate's imprimatur. Ironically, North Korea seems to put more faith in the power of the Senate to prevent war than most Americans do and more trust in a piece of paper than most countries do.

However quixotic North Korea's demand, the Bush administration is on a different page altogether. In its current form, the administration's recent offer is a multilateral, not a bilateral, security agreement. It wouldn't be signed by the Senate. Not surprisingly, North Korea has called the initiative "laughable." Pyongyang already has security agreements with Moscow and Beijing. It's not particularly worried about a Japanese or South Korean attack since the former lacks the capability and the latter lacks the desire. North Korea wants a bilateral agreement with the United States just as it has wanted all along to negotiate directly with the most important military power in East Asia. The United States, it believes—and with good reason—calls the shots in the region.

Still, any flexibility in the Bush position seems on the face of it a victory of the doves over the hawks. Or is it?

First of all, "hawks" and "doves" are not very precise terms to describe the warring factions within the administration. Those who support negotiations with North Korea generally know something about the



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subject. These Korea hands have experience negotiating with Pyongyang and know what does and does not work. Those who favor a hard-line stance, like John Bolton in the State Department or Vice President Dick Cheney, know next to nothing about the regime they'd like to change. Better to call the different factions the Know-Somethings and, after the 19th century American party of xenophobes, the Know-Nothings.

The hardliners might not know much about Korea but they are keen tacticians. They gave a green light to the six-party talks this summer because they expected them to fail. They are similarly hoping that North Korea will reject the current offer of a multilateral security agreement and go forward with some demonstration of its nuclear capability. Then the Know-Nothings will be able to sweep aside the

Know-Somethings and accelerate their campaign to destabilize North Korea.

The current offer of a multilateral security guarantee is no doubt a sincere effort by the Korea hands to find an exit to the problem and to reward South Korea for its pledge of combat troops for the Iraq occupation. The hardliners are letting the diplomats play their little game. Focused on regime change regardless of the consequences, the Know-Nothings in the administration still feel the tug of war.

(John Feffer <JohnFeffer@aol.com> is the author of the newly published North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis (Seven Stories) and a regular contributor to Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org.)

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