

## Caught in the Muddle— Round Two of Bush vs. North Korea

By John Feffer | February 10, 2005

Hope springs eternal that the Bush administration, in its new post-election configuration, will finally get serious about the North Korean nuclear crisis. According to the most optimistic assessment, the new appointments at the State Department—Condoleezza Rice, Robert Zoellick, Christopher Hill—will leaven the administration's hard-line policy with a measure of pragmatism. This more realistic diplomacy will attract North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks. Then the new team of U.S. negotiators will take over, having devised a magic formula of carrots and sticks that will persuade Pyongyang to shut down and then eliminate its plutonium facilities as well as its not-yet-acknowledged highly enriched uranium program.

This scenario is remotely possible.

Much more likely is a continuation of the previous Bush policy: half-hearted negotiations with North Korea, persistent faith that the regime in Pyongyang will collapse, and a program to hasten that end through covert and non-governmental means. When Washington diplomatic circles began to murmur in late January about a possible breakthrough in the U.S. approach, the hardliners dusted off an older charge that North Korea had provided Libya with processed uranium and deployed it to nip any détente in the bud. The net result of all this maneuvering is stasis. "Muddling through" is how North Korea-watchers routinely describe Pyongyang's approach to its economic and foreign policy predicament. But "muddling through" is in fact a much better description of Washington's attempts to resolve a conflict that everyone else considers a very serious crisis.

North Korea has tried to shock the United States into a more flexible position by announcing publicly on February 10 that it possesses nuclear weapons and sees no purpose in participating in the Six-Party Talks as they are presently constituted. As in Pyongyang's previous shock tactics—launching rockets, kicking out nuclear inspectors—this announcement carries the risk

of hardening Washington's position rather than softening it. Given the Bush administration's underlying goals of regime change and the catastrophic consequences of military intervention, the U.S. response to North Korea's latest gambit is likely to be renewed attempts to chart a muddled course.

Rumor or Reality?

Precipitating the latest crisis were headlines that North Korea had crossed the ultimate red line by supplying nuclear material to Libya. This news follows quickly on a report from a South Korean newspaper that the North acquired a complete nuclear weapon from an outside supplier in order to avoid testing one of its own. Those opposed to negotiating with North Korea have seized on both stories to demonstrate that it is time to put aside carrots and show the U.S. stick to those miscreants in Pyongyang.

Neither story has much meat on its bones. The report of Pyongyang's acquisition of a nuclear weapon comes from a single unnamed source in Washington and neglects to explain why North Korea would have gone to such lengths to build not one but two nuclear programs if it could have simply bought the weapons outright. As for the sale of



nuclear material, this story debuted back in May after Libya turned over a cask of uranium hexafluoride to U.S. investigators as part of its own denuclearization deal. Scientists have since failed to identify the source. Having ruled out Pakistan and other candidates, some administration officials have concluded that the supplier must have been North Korea. But since the United States lacks any sample of North Korean uranium, the link cannot definitively be made. The International Atomic Energy Agency, meanwhile, still believes Pakistan might have been the culprit. And the uranium hexafluoride must be processed further to become nuclear material; it is not itself the stuff of bombs.

If the U.S. media is to be believed, North Korea is not only crossing red lines with its nuclear program, it is also on the verge of disintegration.

At the end of November, the media was buzzing with news of upheaval in North Korea. Several visitors reported that the portraits of Kim Jong II were missing from public places. A *New York Times* article cited the defection of 130 North Korean generals. Several journalists began to reinterpret the explosive train accident at Ryongchon in April as an assassination attempt on the North Korean leader. Then there have been reports of anti-government slogans on the walls of buildings, the first stirrings of a popular uprising.

Examined more carefully, however, this “evidence” of incipient regime change in North Korea turns out to be as speculative as the recent nuclear stories. According to South Korean intelligence, no hard evidence has surfaced concerning the defection of a large block of high-ranking North Korean military officers. The train disaster has not led to the purge that might be expected if the government had uncovered or suspected an assassination plot. Anti-government slogans have been reported for more than 10 years—they probably exist but don’t necessarily translate into imminent revolution. And the fact that portraits of Kim Jong II have been removed from public places may support earlier contentions that the North Korean leader is trying to reduce his official personality cult. In his recent memoir recalling seven years as

a translator in Pyongyang, Michael Harrold writes of his temporarily successful campaign to remove “Great Leader” from the translations of Kim II Sung’s works, because he considered the honorific too awkward for English readers. After Western journalists interpreted this change as a sign of the leader’s weakening power, the title was quickly restored. Such is the great potential for error in reading too much into small details in North Korea.

It is also possible that the stories citing signs of North Korea’s imminent demise are not simply misinterpretation. “There is a great deal of pressure coming from somewhere,” a North Korea-based diplomat told *The Guardian* at the end of December. “We don’t know whether it is internal or external, but something is going on.” External pressure is certainly coming from U.S., South Korean, and Japanese civic groups in northeast China that are taking advantage of a porous border to encourage anti-government sentiment within North Korea. The political opposition in South Korea, hostile to the engagement policy of the Roh Moo Hyun administration, has also shifted to a more aggressive stance. It conducted a provocative “fact-finding tour” of China looking at the refugee issue, intending to embarrass both Beijing and Seoul. Opposition lawmakers also leaked to the press two secret South Korean government plans to prepare for mass defections, a possible civil war, and the need to establish an emergency administrative headquarters.

### Key Problems

- Despite rhetoric to the contrary, a chief Bush administration goal has been to isolate North Korea and downplay the economic transformations taking place in the country.
- The Bush administration preference for regime change has hardened the U.S. negotiating position with North Korea.
- Although North Korea is a human rights nightmare, utilizing aid to precipitate Pyongyang’s collapse may lead to broader regional instability and a deeper humanitarian crisis.

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## U.S. Plans

Some political actors in the United States, impatient for the Soviet dominoes to finally fall in East Asia, believe that North Koreans need a little encouragement to change their government. Over the last four years, Washington has been busy working behind the scenes to achieve that goal.

Since confronting North Korea over its secret nuclear program in 2002, the Bush administration has vacillated between talking with Pyongyang and declaring that any compromise with evil is unacceptable. What has remained consistent, however, is the administration's commitment to undermining the North Korean government. In 2003, with its draft Operational Plan 5030, the Pentagon signaled that it was considering ways to "sow enough confusion" within the North Korean military to turn it against the government leadership. Planting information about the defection of 130 generals would serve such a purpose. In November, according to *USA Today*, new CIA head Porter Goss recommended using undercover agents to penetrate the North Korean government (among other hostile countries)—perhaps to sow confusion more directly.

Congress, too, has joined the fray. The North Korea Human Rights Act (NKHRA), passed by Congress in 2004, authorized \$24 million annually to address North Korean refugee and human rights issues. Some groups jockeying to receive this money are sincerely working on behalf of North Korean refugees and defectors, hoping to improve the human rights conditions for North Koreans within the country by publicizing the government's appalling record. But much of the money, if any is appropriated, is likely to go to groups that want to destabilize North Korea by encouraging large numbers of refugees to defect, sending radios and Bibles into the country, and challenging China and South Korea on their more accommodating postures. Buoyed by the new legislation, a group of North Korean defectors has announced its intention to form a government-in-exile. This effort involves such Ahmed Chalabi stand-ins as Park Gap-dong. Park has the dubious

distinction of having once headed up a communist party in South Korea, then defecting to North Korea, and then re-defecting to the South.

The framers of the NKHRA were careful to note that their bill was not connected to regime change. But Kansas Republican Sam Brownback and neoconservative Michael Horowitz of the Hudson Institute have crafted follow-on legislation—titled End Dictatorship, Assist Democracy—that will dispense with rhetorical niceties. Horowitz's vision is to transform 45 autocracies by 2025, North Korea (DPRK) among them, through nonmilitary means. Expect some form of the bill to premiere in Congress soon.

Meanwhile, attempts to link North Korea to al-Qaida—through the reputed sale of some guns to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines—suggest a shoehorning of anti-DPRK activities into the overall war on terrorism. Congress, the State Department, and the CIA will then all play second fiddle to the Rumsfeld-Cheney-Wolfowitz axis of ideologues who see the next four years as a grand opportunity to cross the remaining tasks off their to-do list—by any means necessary. Seymour Hersh argues in his recent *New Yorker* article "The Coming Wars" that the Pentagon will direct its new covert operations, known as "black reconnaissance," first and foremost at Iran. The Bush administration's first-term record demonstrates, however, that neocons are not afraid to multitask.

As these secretive efforts expand, the Bush administration could afford to abate its public crusade against North Korea. Plausible deniability established, it could then play the responsible, if uncompromising, negotiator and leave the destabilizing to those in the background.

## Change in North Korea

Although reports of ferment from below remain sketchy, the North Korean leadership has indeed experienced a considerable political shake-up at the top. In September and October, Kim Jong II restructured his political party, streamlined decision-making, and reportedly put his brother-in-law Chang

Sung-taek under house arrest. Rumors of infighting over succession are rife, and the latest reshuffling does little to clarify which of Kim's sons will be anointed. But some of the changes will enable Kim to advance his economic and military policies more directly.

There has been much ink spilled on the question of economic reform in North Korea: is Kim Jong II following Deng Xiao Ping by introducing capitalism, or is he just pulling a Mao stunt by offering a shadow play of reform? Recent visitors to Pyongyang have returned with stories of expanded markets where those with money can buy practically anything they want. The government has transferred department stores to pro-North Korean entrepreneurs from Japan. North Korean citizens are setting up ice cream stands and other small enterprises. Factory managers have greater freedom to choose what to manufacture and at what price. And Internet cafes are reportedly attracting well-heeled North Korean young people.

But it is the Kaesong Industrial Zone, located just north of the de-militarized zone (DMZ), that most suggests a Deng Xiao Ping trajectory rather than a Mao charade. Defying the DMZ, South Korean capital and North Korean labor will come together to create thousands of factories employing hundreds of thousands of workers. In December, at the factory of the South Korean kitchen supply company Livingarts, the first Kaesong product—some kitchen pots—officially launched the new zone. The Korean version of 7-11, Family Mart, is also planning to open an outlet in Kaesong. True, Pyongyang has voiced skepticism about the whole venture, but the complaints focus on South Korea *for not moving more quickly* with its transfer of capitalism.

This is no egalitarian reform, however. As with structural adjustment programs in general, the liberalization of the North Korean economy concentrates wealth among the already well-connected. Such polarizing effects have not prevented the United States from supporting similar economic ventures elsewhere in the world. And the Bush administration has repeatedly urged North Korea to “join the international mainstream” on such matters.

Yet Washington has cast a cold eye on Kaesong, wielding the Wassenaar Arrangement (an agreement among more than 30 countries coordinating export controls on “dual use” technologies and conventional weapons) to stop such technology transfers as equipment to make wristwatches. The Bush administration has also continued to block North Korea's attempts to join multilateral financial institutions. This leads to the old philosophical riddle of geopolitics: if a country reforms, but no one recognizes it as such, can it still be called reform?

#### Key Recommendations

- U.S. policy should follow the lead of South Korea and China in actively pursuing negotiations with North Korea.
- Washington should encourage South Korean efforts at broadening economic integration.
- The Bush administration should use carrots as well as sticks in halting proliferation, including removing North Korea from the terrorism list and providing security assurances.

#### Stasis

With the departure of Colin Powell and Richard Armitage, the State Department is losing two comparative pragmatists regarding North Korea. Replacing them are a Russia specialist (Condoleezza Rice) and a trade specialist (Robert Zoellick), both noted for their dutiful pursuance of administration zealotry (on Iraq and European Union relations respectively). The new U.S. ambassador to South Korea, Christopher Hill, is slated to replace James Kelly as point person on North Korea, an unenviable position given the short leash that the administration has kept on its negotiators. Pragmatists in the State Department will surely benefit from the departure of firebrand John Bolton, though rumors in Washington suggest that he might find safe haven in the vice president's office, the hub of the hard line toward North Korea. Victor Cha, a conservative academic who will likely grow into a moderate administration official, will offer reality-based assessments from his

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new position as the director of Asian Affairs at the National Security Council.

This new team will no doubt apply themselves energetically to the conundrum of evaporating North Korea's nuclear program. But now that the U.S. elections are over and the Democrats can no longer capitalize on Bush's great failure of diplomacy in East Asia (which they didn't do anyway), the administration won't feel much pressure to move forward on the Six-Party Talks. According to a *CNN/USA Today*/Gallup poll in November, most Americans don't see North Korea as an immediate threat. The possibility of war is also remote, given the Pentagon's overreach in Iraq and Afghanistan plus North Korea's likely reluctance to cross the final red line of transferring nuclear material or weaponry.

So U.S.-DPRK relations could tip either way. Congress hasn't pressed very hard for a negotiated settlement, though two recent congressional delegations—led by NKHRA co-sponsor Tom Lantos (D-CA) and serial visitor Curt Weldon (R-PA)—tried to ease the way for North Korea to return to talks. In the region, the South Korean, Russian, and Chinese governments are clamoring for a more flexible U.S. position, whereas the Japanese government wants to invoke sanctions against Pyongyang for its failure to provide full disclosure on an abductee issue. With a quiescent public at home, regional allies pushing in different directions, and war off the agenda, the Bush administration is likely to choose the middle way of diplomatic stasis coupled with covert and nongovernmental destabilization. This “muddling through” approach is truly faith-based, for it relies on faith in the so-far-elusive collapse of North Korea.

Surely, given that the DPRK is a human rights horror show, central authority implosion is what most

North Koreans also want. After all, the most vocal defectors have expressed very strong anti-government sentiments. In September, however, the Korean newspaper *Segye Times* surveyed 100 North Koreans living in South Korea and found that four out of ten defectors were not happy with their new life. Even more startlingly, one in three said they would return to the DPRK if they could do so legally.

The Bush administration should be mindful of these sentiments as it flirts with toppling the North Korean government and unleashing Iraq-like chaos in East Asia. “Assisting democracy” in North Korea, whatever that could possibly mean, may not be the highest priority for North Koreans, if 33% of those who have tasted democracy in South Korea are willing to exchange it for a return home. The short-term alternative strategy of negotiating with North Korea and trading economic carrots for nuclear sticks may not fulfill everyone's best-case scenario for human rights, but it would go a long way toward eliminating a security threat and improving prospects for economic growth in East Asia. The new team at the State Department should consider how a more flexible U.S. negotiating position—which would deal with the plutonium program first and provide incentives throughout the dismantlement process rather than just at the end—could solve one of the world's most pressing problems and, improbable as it might seem at the moment, provide George W. Bush with a positive legacy when he retires.

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*John Feffer, <[www.johnfeffer.com](http://www.johnfeffer.com)>, is the author of North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis and a regular contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus ([www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)).*

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