

U.S. can't let fire burn out under N. Korea nuke talks

By HAN S. PARK

Optimism prevails over the North Korean nuclear negotiations: North Korea has repeatedly stated that it is willing to get rid of its nuclear program; the Bush administration has praised the six-party talks in Beijing as having achieved a great deal toward the denuclearization of North Korea.

To fuel the optimism, President Bush did something remarkable! On Dec. 6, he sent a personal letter to North Korea's Kim Jong-il. Since placing North Korea on the list of countries that comprise the "axis of evil," along with Iraq and Iran in early 2002, Bush has consistently condemned Kim by calling him a "ruthless dictator" who is untrustworthy. Bush has refused to talk directly with Kim, as the "evil dictator" is not worthy to be his negotiating counterpart.

Has Bush fundamentally changed his stance? Are we indeed on the verge of witnessing a breakthrough in solving the North Korean nuclear crisis by diplomacy?

In reality, as time runs out on his presidency, Bush is nowhere near resolving any of the serious issues in Iraq, Iran or North Korea. With its back against the wall, the Bush administration is more desperate than ever to secure a diplomatic, nonmilitary solution in Korea. The United States' protracted involvement in Iraq has rendered additional military confrontations unfeasible. Moreover, to justify its unwavering hard-line policy toward Iran (i.e., of using economic and political sanctions to extract concessions from Tehran), the Bush administration needs to demonstrate that a similar policy is working elsewhere. Bush is eager to show the world (and Iran in particular) that if a rogue state is sanctioned enough by the international community, it will eventually succumb to demands.

By the same token, the Bush administration also wants to prove that if such a rogue demonstrates compliant behavior (giving up its nuclear ambition), then it will be rewarded with economic and political incentives. A success in the six-party talks would do just that, and the Bush administration has developed an intense desire for such a success.

Yet, neither side has altered its list of demands, nor have the significant challenges to resolving the nuclear crisis in North Korea abated. That is, what Pyongyang wants from Washington is the assurance of security through the removal of the latter's "hostile attitudes and policy," which will include deleting North Korea from its list of terrorist states, concluding the Korean War (replacing the current cease-fire agreement signed in 1953 with a mutual non-aggression pact or peace treaty), and normalizing diplomatic relations.

The Bush administration seems to be prepared to discuss all of the above if North Korea fulfills the obligations on its end, which include shutting down, disabling, and dismantling the existing reactor at Yongbyon and disclosing and eventually destroying all of its nuclear programs and weapons. Despite all the media hype and wide-spread optimism for the six-party talks in recent months, the multiple rounds of the talks for the last four years have progressed only to the beginning phase of North Korea's temporary freezing of the reactor in exchange for the initial shipments of crude oil by the other countries. The next important steps are for North Korea to disclose a full list of its nuclear programs and weapons and for the other parties to complete the provision of crude oil shipments and to implement further measures of reconciliation.

But will Pyongyang produce a list that is satisfactory to Washington? If the Bush administration continues to insist that the alleged uranium program be included in the list, the negotiations will continue to stall; Pyongyang has never admitted even the existence of such a program. Further, the issue of the fate of any existing nuclear weapons has never even been formally brought to the table. It is naive to expect that Pyongyang (or for that matter, any sovereign state) would disclose the specifics (numbers and whereabouts) of its nuclear bombs without significant up-front concessions from its negotiating partners, particularly when it perceives a threat to its security. On the other hand, will the Bush administration be able and willing to comply fully with the concessions required by the six-party agreement? Considering the overwhelmingly negative perception of North Korea in Congress and the general public, it is highly doubtful that the Bush administration can go beyond the provision of crude oil.

Yet despite these limitations, hope for a resolution remains. Pyongyang will not likely shy away from the six-party talks, for it hopes to maintain beneficial economic ties with other countries, especially South Korea. Seoul's Roh Moo-hyun government is, at present, eager to carry out any concrete measures that it perceives might help inter-Korean reconciliation before Roh's presidency expires in two months, when a more conservative government led by President-elect Lee Myung Bak will be installed. In fact, it is now, when diverse interests coincide, that may be the opportune time to achieve progress: both Bush and Roh of South Korea are desperate to establish a lasting and meaningful legacy in their respective nations, and Kim of North Korea wants to deepen his nation's relations with Seoul and to improve its ties with Washington. But none of these are viable if Kim Jong-il feels that his state continues to face a security threat.

As Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill's last-minute effort in Pyongyang to help North Korea forge the aforementioned list was aborted recently, the expected reconvening of the six-party talks is yet to be scheduled. But the time is now ripe to drive the lingering optimism surrounding the negotiations into a full-blown resolution to the crisis. Bush can salvage some measure of his legacy to the world by committing to create a more secure environment so that North Korea may be able to relinquish its nuclear program, which it considers to be its only deterrent against a possible military attack. This commitment must be realized before North Korea's complete denuclearization. Otherwise, we will be left with no choice but to accept North Korea as a nuclear state.

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