

US-North Korean Nuclear Agreement: Clearing The Decks For Iran

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The deal reached between the US and North Korea at six-party talks in Beijing on Tuesday has been variously described in the international media as a “landmark” and an “historic agreement”—holding out the prospect of ending more than five decades of confrontation between the two countries.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Far from marking a fundamental change in the militarist course of the Bush administration, the deal represents a temporary and tactical shift that conveniently sidelines a potentially explosive issue as the US prepares for war against Iran.

Superficially at least, the deal involves an about-face on the part of the US. After coming to office and tearing up the previous 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea, the Bush administration had adamantly refused to hold bilateral talks with Pyongyang or “reward bad behaviour”—that is, to provide incentives for North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs. In 2002, Bush declared North Korea to be part of an “axis of evil” and repeatedly denounced North Korean leader Kim Jong Il as “a tyrant” and “a dictator”.

Over the past year, Bush has refrained from publicly denigrating the North Korean leadership. In the lead-up to the current round of six-party talks, chief US negotiator Christopher Hill met one-to-one with his North Korean counterpart in Germany to thrash out the agreement reached this week. And a key element of the deal is the provision of fuel oil or its equivalent in return for North Korean commitments on its nuclear programs.

However, a closer examination of the agreement reveals that the US is committed to very little, particularly in the long term. The only concrete timetable is for an initial phase of 60 days in which North Korea will freeze all activity at its Yongbyon nuclear plant and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors back into the country in return for 50,000 tonnes of fuel oil. North Korea is also required to provide a list of all its nuclear programs, including plutonium extracted from used fuel rods.

On the other hand, all the US pledges are easily reversible. The US will “start” bilateral talks aimed at “moving towards” full diplomatic relations. The US will “begin” the process of ending Pyongyang’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. “Working parties” will be established to discuss the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, the normalisation of US-North Korean relations and Japanese-North Korean relations, regional security and economic cooperation.

In the second stage, for which no timetable is given, North Korea is obliged to permanently disable all its nuclear facilities, including its research reactor and plutonium reprocessing plant, in return for an additional 950,000 tonnes of fuel oil. As far as Pyongyang is concerned, the agreement involves giving up its claim to two light-water reactors promised under the previous Agreed Framework and to dismantling all its nuclear programs—its chief bargaining chip—in return for rather vague promises about normalising relations with the US and Japan. Enormous pressure, particularly from ally China, has been applied to force North Korea to sign up to this arrangement.

For the Bush administration, it is an agreement cheaply bought. The total aid concretely being offered to North Korea—a million tonnes of fuel oil—is worth about \$400 million and is equivalent to just two years supply previously guaranteed under the Agreed Framework. South Korea, which along with Russia, China and Japan has a seat at the six-party talks, has agreed to fund most of the aid. A temporary hitch in the five days of talks occurred when Japan refused to pay for any of the aid. Like Washington, Tokyo has adopted a highly aggressive stance toward Pyongyang.

The international press is full of speculation about North Korea's willingness to hold up its side of the bargain. The real question is just how long it will be before the Bush administration manufactures a pretext to walk away from the agreement and resume its menacing posture. If one goes by the record, it will be sooner rather than later.

The agreement has already provoked a barely concealed snarl from the most militarist elements of the Bush administration and among its extreme right-wing backers. Former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, who is due to be installed as US deputy secretary of state, immediately denounced the agreement as “a bad deal”. “It contradicts fundamental premises of the president's policy he's been following for the past six years,” he said. “And second, it makes the administration look very weak at a time in Iraq... when it needs to look strong.”

The Wall Street Journal published an editorial on Wednesday deriding the agreement as “faith-based proliferation”. After declaring that “perhaps Mr Bush feels that this is best he can do in the waning days of his administration,” the newspaper guardedly pointed to the actual purpose of the deal. “Or perhaps, in the most favourable interpretation, he wants to clear the decks of the issue in order to have more political capital to control Iran's nuclear ambitions,” the editorial commented.

The contradiction between the Bush administration's attitude to Iran and to North Korea is glaringly obvious. Unlike North Korea, which has tested a crude nuclear device, Iran is a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, has abided by its terms and insists that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes. Yet Washington has repeatedly refused to hold talks with Tehran, is engaged in an escalating propaganda war against Iran and is amassing a large naval armada in the Persian Gulf to menace her.

While the Wall Street Journal and Bolton warn that the North Korean deal sends the wrong message to Iran, the Bush administration has no intention of reversing its war drive. Whatever the tactical differences in the White House over North Korea, there is unanimity on the aggressive confrontation that is recklessly being prepared against Tehran. As the Wall Street Journal hints, the logical explanation for the deal with North Korea is that it “clears the decks”.

In the public debate, one voice has been so far notably absent—Vice President Dick Cheney, whose support for an aggressive policy against North Korea and for “regime change” in Pyongyang is well known. Cheney previously has vigorously opposed any watering down of the US stance on North Korea or any, even small, concession to Pyongyang.

In 2003, as the US State Department was engaged in feverish diplomatic activity to resurrect the six-party talks, Cheney effectively scuttled the process by rejecting the terms of the negotiations. In comments reported in Knight Ridder newspapers on December 19 that year, he told a meeting of top US officials: “I have been charged by the president with making sure that none of the tyrannies in the world are negotiated with. We don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.”

In September 2005, at the previous round of six-party talks, a broad framework for a settlement was agreed by all sides. Almost immediately the deal was upset, as North Korea discovered that the US Treasury Department had frozen \$24 million of assets in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA), claiming the money came from illicit activities. The move and subsequent US efforts to impose a financial embargo provoked outrage in Pyongyang, which denounced Washington for bargaining in bad faith and refused to return to talks.

Several media reports indicated that Cheney’s office had a hand in sabotaging the talks. Tensions boiled over again after North Korea ignored international warnings and test-fired a long-range ballistic missile last July, then exploded a small nuclear bomb in October. Japan and the US pushed through two UN resolutions—with the backing of China and Russia—imposing sanctions on North Korea.

If the most militarist elements of the Bush administration, led by Cheney, have not vetoed or sabotaged the latest agreement—as yet—it is not because they have had a change of heart. Rather it is because they have concluded that with the US military mired in an escalating war in Iraq, and preparations underway for new aggression against Iran, the US is in no position immediately to deal with a third crisis in North Korea.

In the long-term, however, the US cannot avoid a confrontation in North East Asia. Just as its wars in the Middle East are aimed at dominating that oil-rich region, the Bush administration’s confrontation with North Korea is bound up with America’s strategic and economic interests. The tensions over North Korea’s nuclear programs have been a convenient pretext for maintaining and bolstering the US military presence in the region, and pressuring its rivals—particularly China.

As the Wall Street Journal noted, the latest agreement was “a victory for China, which has sought to take a higher profile in global diplomacy and has played a major role in spreading the talks”. In other words, Bush’s “diplomatic success” has weakened the US position in North East Asia. Such a situation is simply unacceptable to the US ruling elite.

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