

Bush Changes Course on North Korea

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For

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Recently, President Bush adjusted US policy toward North Korea, and Pyongyang appears to be responding positively. President Bush indicated on October 19 the United States' willingness to provide North Korea written, multilateral security guarantees. Pyongyang's official media initially dismissed the offer as "laughable." China then announced that it would send the head of its legislature, Wu Banguo, to North Korea. A few days later, on October 25, North Korea, in a carefully worded and more authoritative Foreign Ministry statement, indicated a willingness to "consider Bush's remarks on the written assurances of nonaggression if they are based on the intention to coexist with (North Korea) and aim to play a positive role in realizing the proposal for a package solution ..."

These shifts by Washington and Pyongyang improve prospects for continuation of the Six Party Talks process. They also brighten prospects for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution of the impasse over North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Nevertheless, a resolution still remains a distant hope.

The change in the US position became evident early in September. On September 4, a ranking State Department official, in a back ground briefing at the State Department, told reporters that the Bush Administration was willing to initiate a step by step process with North Korea designed to engineer a "peaceful, diplomatic" end to North Korea's nuclear weapons development programs. The official also made it clear that the Bush Administration would remain engaged in the Six Party Talks. Secretary of State Powell the next day, September 5, confirmed that the United States was considering how best to provide North Korea security assurances.

Confusing Conclusion

The first round of Six Party Talks ended in confusion. The talks, held in Beijing from August 27 to 29 between China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States, did not yield any significant progress toward a solution. They did, however, halt the escalation of tensions between the United States and North Korea. On the final day of the talks, the US media, citing ranking Bush Administration officials, reported that some influential elements in the administration were unhappy with the talks. They claimed that North Korea had repeated its "nuclear" threats to the US during the talks.

The next day, however, China's vice minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi surprised the media, and observers, with a six point "consensus" document. He said that all the participants had agreed, including North Korea, to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. Participants also concurred, he claimed, that a peaceful solution needed to be found through diplomatic dialogue. Another "consensus" point emphasized the need to taken into consideration North Korea's concerns about its security. The most mysterious point indicated that all the participants had agreed to pursue either "parallel or simultaneous" steps to achieve a diplomatic solution. North Korea has long championed the "simultaneous" approach, but the advocate of "parallel" steps was unknown, at least to the public.

Then North Korea's delegation, in its departure statement on August 30, cast doubt on whether it would return for a second round of talks. North Korea's chief delegate, standing before a gaggle of journalists at Beijing Airport, said that his country had no reason to continue its participation in the talks if the United States did not cease its "hostile" policy toward Pyongyang. Journalists around the world quickly interpreted the statement to mean that North Korea would not return for a second round of Six Party talks.

Diplomatic Flurry

A flurry of intense diplomacy followed. China's official Xinhua news service, citing North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), reported North Korea's "official" position. According to this report, North Korea was prepared to agree to dismantle its nuclear weapons programs, to allow inspections to verify this had been done, and to cease its development and export of ballistic missiles, but not without concessions from the United States. Pyongyang wanted Washington to engage in negotiations that would lead to the end of its "hostile policy," gain it security guarantees, end sanctions and set the stage for a peace treaty. China then issued a relatively blunt statement that called upon the United States to demonstrate "flexibility."

South Korea's foreign minister visited Washington. Surprisingly, he was invited to the White House, a most unusual occurrence. Washington-Seoul relations have been strained for several months, in part over how best to deal with Pyongyang. Washington remained reluctant to give North Korea written security assurances, something Seoul favored. Also, Washington opposed either negotiating with North Korea, or giving it any concessions until after Pyongyang had "verifiably" dismantled its nuclear weapons programs. Seoul pressed Washington to be more flexible and to consider offering Pyongyang inducements for its cooperation. The stand off between the two allies had aligned Seoul more with Beijing than Washington prior to and during the Six Party Talks.

Shift Confirmed

The September 4-5 shift in the US approach followed. Secretary of State Colin Powell on September 5 confirmed on the record that the United States was ready to consider giving North Korea the "security guarantees it has been seeking," if Pyongyang would agree to engage in a "step by step process" to resolve the nuclear impasse. Powell's remarks echoed China's Wang Yi's "consensus" point regarding a "step by step or parallel" process. The offer of security guarantees also was the first significant concession Washington has offered Pyongyang since the Bush Administration began.

Pyongyang seemed to match Washington's apparent conciliatory statement. On September 9, North Korea celebrated the 55th anniversary of its birth with a huge parade. An annual event, tens of thousands of North Koreans marched through Kim Il Sung Plaza past Kim Jong Il in a carefully crafted display of loyalty to Kim Jong Il and national unison. Included in the colorful display were thousands of goose-stepping soldiers. The

parade appeared to be designed to convey the message that the North Korean people are united in their loyalty to Kim Jong Il and are prepared to defend his regime. At the same time, however, the noticeable absence of the usual display of tanks, artillery and ballistic missiles suggested North Korea was not a threat to anyone. A few days after the parade, the State Department confirmed that activity at North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center appeared to have ceased, at least for the time being.

The Bush Administration then announced on September 15 that it would continue funding the administrative costs of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). The amount is relatively small (\$3.7 million) and it covers administrative costs for the current 2003 fiscal year (no funds have been requested for next year), but the message to Pyongyang was very significant. KEDO appeared doomed when North Korea confirmed in October 2002 that it had broken the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework, and then proclaimed the agreement defunct early in January, 2003. Earlier, Washington had halted funding for KEDO's annual shipment of 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil to North Korea.

Washington's continued funding of KEDO's administrative costs suggests to Pyongyang that a diplomatic deal remains possible. North Korea had mentioned at the August Six Party talks that any future deal should include completion of the two light water reactors that KEDO has been constructing in North Korea.

Washington Wavers, Again

Washington then appeared to reverse course. Although the Secretary of State on September 5 had spoken officially and on the record, President Bush had not affirmed his remarks, at least not for the next six weeks. Washington sent mixed signals during the last week of September. First, Japan convened an informal trilateral meeting between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo. North Korea topped the agenda. The absence of any official statement or briefing after the two day meeting suggests that no consensus was reached on how to proceed with Pyongyang and the hoped for next round of Six Party Talks.

Then an informal meeting of five of the six participants in the Six Party Talks convened in New York. Represented were China, Japan, the two Koreas and the United States. Russia, for unknown reasons, was not represented. Again, North Korea topped the agenda. Remarks by North Korea's representative suggested that his government had softened considerably its position on security assurances. He did not mention a "non-aggression pact," which had long been the core of what Pyongyang wanted in the way of security assurances. Nor was there any reference to "legally binding" security assurances such as a U.S. Congressional resolution or some similar written document. Instead, it was suggested that Pyongyang might settle for written assurances similar to those provided in the US-North Korea Joint Statements of June 1993 and October 2000.

The ranking U.S. diplomat present reportedly disappointed not just North Korea's representative, but also those from China and South Korea. He indicated that

Washington could not provide written assurances. Instead, it would only offer verbal promises not to threaten, invade or pursue regime change in North Korea. This was far from what Secretary Powell had offered three weeks earlier.

Obviously, Washington's inter-agency foreign policy group remained deeply divided over the issue of security assurances for North Korea. At the same time, President Bush's silence suggested he remained reluctant to affirm Powell's September 5 remarks as an accurate summary of U.S. foreign policy.

Pyongyang promptly reacted negatively. Its official media first claimed that Japan would not be welcome at future Six Party Talks. Japan's insistence on addressing the abducted Japanese issue on the margins of the Six Party Talks may have prompted this outburst. Few took it seriously since Beijing, not Pyongyang, hosts and coordinates these talks. But then Pyongyang indicated that it might disengage from future talks and instead demonstrate its nuclear capability.

Increasing the Pressure

Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo quickly increased the diplomatic pressure on both Washington and Pyongyang. Seoul quietly told Washington that it expected something in return for sending Korean combat troops to Iraq. In addition to financial compensation, Seoul wanted Washington to demonstrate greater collaboration with its more moderate approach to North Korea. Specifically, Seoul expected Washington to follow through on the security assurances that Powell had outlined on September 5.

Tokyo quietly echoed Seoul's preferences. Prime Minister Koizumi respects President Bush and is proud of their friendship. He also concurs with Bush that it is best to deal firmly with Kim Jong Il. But Tokyo, like Seoul, is intent upon seeing a peaceful, diplomatic resolution to the nuclear impasse, even if it means giving Pyongyang security assurances

On October 7, after meeting in Bali, Indonesia, representatives from Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul stated their nations' common position regarding North Korea in item 13 of their Joint Declaration on the promotion of tripartite cooperation. First they affirmed their opposition to the "proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," then "reaffirm (ed) their commitment to a peaceful solution of the nuclear issue facing the Korean Peninsula through dialogue ..., while addressing all the concerns of the parties ...". Reading between the lines, "all the concerns" seems to encompass Pyongyang's desire for security assurances.

Ten days after the Bali trilateral statement, Bush met Koizumi in Tokyo. According to Japanese government sources, he urged the president to offer Pyongyang written security assurances, but only if Pyongyang agreed to begin the "verifiable" dismantling of its nuclear programs. The short official Japanese government statement issued after this "non-summit" explained that the two leaders had agreed to "closely cooperate for a peaceful solution on issues such as nuclear development and to work toward an early resumption of the six-party talks ...". Two days later, President Bush, after meeting with

his Chinese and South Korean counterparts, offered written multilateral security assurances to Pyongyang in exchange for its dismantling its nuclear programs.

Beijing and Seoul then turned their attention to Pyongyang. The nature of their efforts remains secret. Both most likely promised Pyongyang economic inducements if it would consider Bush's offer. Also, Beijing's promise to dispatch a high ranking delegation to Pyongyang is an important face saving gesture for Kim Jong Il. He can use such a gesture to explain to his hardliners that his willingness to participate in another round of Six Party Talks is not a concession to the United States. Instead, he can claim that he is doing so in return for Beijing's demonstration of respect for North Korea's leader and sovereignty.

Temporary Tactical or Long Term Strategic Shift?

Our answer begins with a question, why has Bush adjusted his approach to North Korea early last September? Is it because of what happened at the Six Party Talks last August, or is it because of pressure from Beijing, or fear of North Korea? The answer seems to have little to do with international reality. Diplomatic pressure from China and Seoul, or sensitivity to the concerns of America's allies in Northeast Asia, probably were secondary considerations for Bush and his advisers. Domestic US political considerations most likely were the decisive factors.

Since August, the American public's attitude toward President Bush, as reflected in the US Congress and public opinion polls, has shifted from very positive to increasingly negative. Bush has made a series of serious political errors. First he and his advisers pursued a public information campaign that inflated the American people's expectations about what the Administration could accomplish in the war on terrorism and in Iraq. Reality and results, however, have not substantiated these expectations. Despite President Bush's declaration last May that the US mission in Iraq had been "accomplished," sadly, the number of American casualties continues to increase. Despite the Bush Administration's claims that significant progress is being made toward Iraq's democratization, increasing numbers of Iraqi people are demanding an end to the US occupation. Despite the administration's claims that Al Qaeda has been weakened and "is on the run," major incidents of terrorism continue around the world.

These developments are frustrating and angering Americans. The criticism began early this summer with the credibility problem regarding the Bush Administration's pre-Iraq invasion allegations regarding the size of Saddam Hussein's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. For most Americans, this is not a serious concern. Rather, it is a problem that primarily concerns the journalist community and Bush's political critics, especially in the US Congress. This clamor will gradually go subside.

The mounting number of American casualties in Iraq has become a major political liability for Bush. Americans serving in the US armed forces and their families also are impatient with President Bush because they have no idea how long it will be before their lives return to normal. Then in September, the Defense Department announced that all

tours of duty for US military personnel in Iraq would be extended. This outraged tens of thousands of American mothers, fathers, husbands and the wives. It means their loved ones will face danger much longer than anticipated. Also, this angered the thousands of U.S. military reservists and National Guardsmen who were called up to serve temporarily for military duty. Unlike regular soldiers, whose full time job is to fight wars, reservists had to leave behind much higher paying jobs to serve in Iraq.

Here too, Bush has created inflated expectations. He claimed his reduction of income taxes would prompt economy recovery. So far, the recovery has been slow to materialize. Meanwhile, the majority of Americans learned that a small percentage of the wealthiest Americans benefited the most from the tax cut.

Obviously, President Bush does not need another crisis. For him, his first priority must remain Iraq, and then the US economy's problems are consuming increasing attention. He appears intent on keeping North Korea low on his priority list.

These domestic political concerns probably are the foremost reasons that he adjusted his approach to North Korea. A secondary consideration may have been the fact that the United States found itself almost isolated at the August Six Party Talks. No nation was completely comfortable with the United States' reluctance to negotiate with North Korea.

All Options Remain Open

Despite the Bush Administration's softening of its previously rigid approach, its goal remains unchanged. It seeks a peaceful, diplomatic agreement, but one that "verifiably" leads to the complete dismantling of North Korea's entire nuclear weapons development program. For the time being, the Bush Administration appears willing to accent diplomacy while restraining both its military option and its hard liners. The usually outspoken State Department Under Secretary for International Security Affairs John Bolton has been quiet recently and Defense Department chiefs Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz are consumed with Iraq.

Bush's adjusted approach addresses the Administration's most pressing concerns. It allows the Administration to remain focused on Iraq and the US economy. It improves prospects that North Korea will remain engaged in the Six Party Talks process, thus lowering chances that the North Korean problem could explode into another crisis, at least for the time being. It also diminishes chances that the United States might find itself isolated at the Six Party Talks. Meanwhile, it also makes more time available to refine the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and related military options.

If, however, after six months or after 2 or 3 more rounds of the Six Party, there is no positive sign from North Korea that it will end its nuclear programs, Bush could return to an assertive US strategy that accents PSI and his military option. This could prove true particularly if the Iraq situation has stabilized and US casualties have subsided.

The approaching U.S. presidential campaign will be heating up six months hence. By that time, President Bush might be tempted to use the Korean situation to promote prospects for his reelection next fall. Resuming his hard line approach to Pyongyang could prove politically popular, especially if North Korea is still clinging to its nuclear weapons programs. Americans can be counted on to rally behind their president when ever he is seen to be playing the role of the commander-in-chief of the US Armed Forces. We saw this after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This does not make war on the Korean Peninsula more likely next year, but it could make President Bush increasingly prone to pursue a much more assertive stance that accents his military option.

Pyongyang would be well advised to take advantage of Washington's apparent temporary, tactical adjustment to forge a diplomatic deal. Pyongyang should not view Bush's adjustment in policy as a sign of political weakness on his part. This would be a serious miscalculation. If Pyongyang delays too long or pushes for too much from Washington, it could find itself confronting an even more hostile U.S. strategy by next spring.

For the time beginning, however, the recent demonstration of flexibility both by Washington and Pyongyang augers well for the continuation of the Six Party Talks process. Before the next round can begin, both sides must take concrete steps to indicate to the other side its sincerity. We can also anticipate that discussion of security assurances and inspections to verify that North Korea is dismantling its nuclear programs will be the primary topics at the next round.