

North Korea and President Bush's Year of Woe

, To restart the talks, The Bush Administration could improve prospects for achieving success in the Six Party Talks by improving its tarnished image, both at home and abroad. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, like his father, prefers to do business with foreign leaders who have broad support, both at home and internationally. This is because Kim Jong Il has learned that politically powerful foreign leaders are better able to fulfill the promises they make to North Korea.

Recent examples confirm this. Kim Jong Il's dealings with China's Hu Jin Dao and Russian President Vladimir Putin also come to mind. Also, in 2000, at the apex of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's influence abroad and popularity at home, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il met Kim for the first ever Korean summit. Kim Jong Il greeted Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in Pyongyang in 2002 soon after Koizumi had firmly demonstrated his political prowess at home. Meanwhile, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun and U.S. President George W. Bush President Bush's declining influence at home and abroad has diminished chances that North Korea will soon return to the Six Party Talks, but not. The latter two leaders have serious problems at home, while some of Bush's policies have sparked substantial criticism abroad.

It is now widely recognized that the Six Party Talks are stalled again. Pyongyang's insistence that Washington must provide it a light water reactor (LWR) as part of any deal angered and rallied Washington's hardliners. When chief U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill tried to visit Pyongyang at the end of September to grapple with the LWR issue, his superiors demanded that Pyongyang first shut down its plutonium producing nuclear reactor. Pyongyang said no, which compelled Hill to give up his trip.

The November round of talks in Beijing achieved nothing, but then North Korean chief negotiator Kim Gye Kwan seemed to voice reason for hope. He claimed on November 11 that the United States had agreed to engage his government in bilateral discussions about economic sanctions. The Bush Administration at first neither confirmed nor denied this. After much quiet diplomacy, Washington claimed that it had only invited North Korean officials to a "working level briefing" in New York and ruled out any possibility of Kim Gye Kwan's participation and bilateral negotiation about economic sanctions.

Outraged, Pyongyang publicly accused Washington of reneging on a promise and declared it would not return to the Six Party Talks until Christopher Hill had invited his North Korean counterpart to New York to discuss economic sanctions. Predictably, Washington refused to do so. Shortly afterward, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea declared North Korea to be a "criminal regime" because of its involvement in alleged trade in international contraband such as the distribution of counterfeit currency and drugs.

Suffice it to say, prospects for resumption of the Six Party Talks in the near future are very bleak. They would be much better if President Bush were able to demonstrate to

North Korea that his administration could fulfill any promises it might make as part of a deal to denuclearize North Korea or better able to rally international support for intensifying diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea. President Bush presently cannot do either.

At home, President Bush's popularity has continued to decline throughout 2005. Only one year ago, after winning re-election, he boasted that he had earned much political capital and that he intended to invest it in convincing Congress to approve his list of legislative initiatives. Clearly, he has failed to do so. Public resistance blunted his effort to reform Social Security. He struggled and ultimately failed to rally Senate approval for his nomination of John Bolton as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. His and his administration's slow and inept response Hurricane Katrina and its devastation angered many Americans and embarrassed his supporters.

Investigations focused on President Bush's key ally and friend in the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas Delay, and Vice President Chaney's closest adviser Scooter Jackson further tarnished the administrations image. Efforts to improve his and his administration's image with president trips to South America and East Asia did not help. Neither trip yield tangible benefit for the American people.

President Bush next struggled to win Congressional support for quick passage of the Patriot Act, the domestic cornerstone of his strategy to fight international terrorism. Just before the Congress voted whether to renew this law, the *New York Times*, after delaying the story for one year, finally revealed that President Bush had personally authorized electronic monitoring of American citizens who might be involved with foreign terrorists. Americans and their elected representatives, both Republicans and Democrats, immediately reacted with outrage. For President Bush and his administration, this domestic political storm is certain to rage for many weeks.

Abroad, President Bush in 2005 encountered equally debilitating problems. President Bush's promises to secure the United States for its enemies have yet to achieve concrete results. National Missile Defense remains more a dream than a reality. The President's strategy to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has achieved very limited and mixed results. Only Libya has forsaken such weapons. Iran and North Korea remain intent on further development of their WMD arsenals.

Meanwhile, the war against terrorism has only succeeded in sparing the United States from other major terrorist attack within its borders. Indonesia, Spain and the United Kingdom, however, suffered terrible terrorist attacks. The war in Iraq grins on. While the death toll of Iraqis and American military has climbed steadily, the number of nations willing to commit troops in support of the US military presence has likewise declined steadily. Afghanistan continues its struggle against Taliban insurgents, opium peddling warlords and widespread corruption and mismanagement.

Similarly, President Bush proudly proclaimed in his inauguration speech in January 2005 that his administration would promote democracy, respect for individual freedom and counter despotism around the world.

Even if North Korea were to abruptly reverse itself and return to the Six Party Talks early in 2006, chances of a Six Party deal would most likely remain slim. A key reason is President Bush's inability to deliver on any promises that he and his administration might make to North Korea. At the present time, President Bush's political influence at home and abroad would appear to be at a very low level.