

**The Bush Administration's Second Term  
Policy Toward North Korea**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

President Bush begins his second term as president of the United States with a very different attitude toward international affairs. Soon after assuming the presidency in January 2001, Bush designated domestic issues as first priority. Foreign affairs were of secondary concern. The traumatic events of September 11, 2001 literally turned his priorities upside down. Abruptly, he became consumed with a global war on terrorism. Quick military victory in Afghanistan ignited the Administration's confidence. In December 2001, he declared the U.S. right to preemptively attack any nation that the United States perceived as a nuclear threat to its national security threatened. A month later, President Bush in his annual State of the Union speech before the U.S. Congress defined an "axis of evil" consisting of Iraq, Iran, Libya and North Korea. He confidently claimed that his administration would win the war on terrorism while dealing decisively with these threats to U.S. national security.

Obviously, President Bush's accomplishments have not yet matched his promises to the American people, as well as U.S. allies around the world. The war on terrorism persists in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bush often proudly proclaims to the American people that his war on terrorism has made it safer for Americans at home. Unfortunately, the world, however, remains a very dangerous place for not just Americans, but also the citizens of many European nations, and particularly the people of Iraq, Turkey and Egypt.

Most apparent is the failure of President Bush's efforts to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly nuclear weapons. The nation he declared posed the most serious threat in this regard turned out not to have any WMD. One of his closest allies in the war on terrorism, Pakistan, however, proved to be the world's leading proliferators of nuclear weapons technology. Libya, after intensive secret negotiations with the United Kingdom, decided to discard its WMD in exchange for significant incentives that included the normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with the European Union and the United States. Iran and North Korea, however, persist in their pursuit of nuclear arsenals.

President Bush in other words began his second term by continuing his resolute effort to accomplish the foreign policy goals of his first term. Winning the war on terrorism remains his top priority. Despite more than two years of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military remains preoccupied with attempting to defeat still highly potent insurgencies in both nations. He has relinquished to the European Union the diplomatic campaign to halt Iran's quest for a nuclear arsenal. North Korea, however, has yet to be deterred from its nuclear ambitions.

## **Failure of "Wu-wei" Strategy**

An ancient Chinese sage first defined the strategy of "*wu-wei*." Literally this means accomplishing something by doing nothing. President Bush tried a similar strategy with North Korea during his first term. One "neo-con" gave Bush's strategy the title "benign neglect," which is the essence of "*wu-wei*." Bush declared that North Korea had failed to

fulfill its promises not to pursue the building of a nuclear arsenal. Consequently, Bush declared, it was unworthy of diplomatic dialogue and negotiation with the United States. He dismissed “rewarding its misconduct” by either engaging in diplomatic dialogue with it or offering it any concessions to influence its conduct. At the same time, he sought to belittle its leader and discredit his regime in the eyes of the international community by handing derogatory labels on both. All the while, President Bush sought to confront Kim Jong Il with a “strategic” decision. If Kim would give up his WMD arsenal of ballistic missiles and chemical-biological weapons, plus discard his nuclear ambitions, President Bush promised to take a “bold” step to help the people of North Korea. Otherwise, the United States would ensure the demise of Kim Jong Il and his regime.

The “*Wu-wei*” strategy was based on the inaccurate assumption that Kim Jong Il’s regime was on the verge of collapse. This idea had acquired broad support among “neo-cons” during the latter years of the Clinton Administration. There is no doubting that North Korea’s economy virtually collapsed in the years immediately after the Soviet Union’s collapse and China’s normalization of relations with South Korea. But by 1998, both China and South Korea took steps to restore North Korea’s economic vigor. By 2002, North Korea’s economic decline had not only halted, but a gradual recovery was underway. Bush’s closest advisers, however, still cling to the hope that North Korea’s economic collapse is imminent.

Obviously, Kim Jong Il and his regime today are in far better health than was true in 1995. If anything, Bush’s “*wu-wei*” strategy may have convinced Kim Jong Il that the foremost goal of U.S. policy toward North Korea was regime change. In any event, this strategy did nothing to convince Kim Jong Il to give up his WMD arsenal.

### **CVID Strategy**

Reluctantly, President Bush early in 2003 accepted China’s invitation to engage in a diplomatic campaign aimed at halting North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. By June 2003, this took the form of the Six Party Talks with China, the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and the United States. President Bush along with the other participants quickly rallied around the common goal of achieving a “peaceful diplomatic” end to North Korea’s nuclear program. But then the process stalled.

President Bush still refused to engage North Korea in diplomatic dialogue and negotiations. Instead, he demanded that North Korea first “completely, verifiably and irreversibly dismantle” all of its nuclear programs, both military and civilian, plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Washington’s “neo-con” advocates of this position designated it “CVID.” Essential to CVID is the requirement that North Korea first capitulate and accept all of Bush’s terms without alteration or concessions. In other words, the U.S. offer was not negotiable. Either North Korea submitted to it, or confront “other options.”

This highly coercive and confrontational strategy also failed. The Bush Administration had hoped that CVID would compel North Korea to make a “strategic decision” to end its

nuclear ambitious. If anything, the strategy accomplished the exact opposite results. First it stalled the Six Party Talks beginning in July 2004. Then it apparently spurred North Korea to quicken its development of nuclear weapons. This became apparently on February 10, 2005 when North Korea announced that it had produced nuclear weapons.

A primary reason for the failure of the CVID strategy is the Bush Administration's inability to convincingly define "other options." When President Bush first began to talk about "other options," he indicated that these included possible U.S. military action against North Korea. The persistent insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, eventually required that the United States shift one third of ground forces from Korea to Iraq in the summer of 2004. Additionally, public testimony by U.S. military leaders in Congress confirmed that U.S. military capability was stretched thin around the world. Pyongyang apparently concluded that Washington would not be able to back its threat of "other options" with military might.

This became clearer in recent months as the Bush Administration began defining "other options" in terms of taking the North Korea nuclear issue to the United Nations Security Council. In other words, the louder the U.S. threat to send the nuclear issue to the Security Council, the less likely "other options" including military action.

### **Bush's Dilemma**

At the start of his second term, President Bush, more than Kim Jong Il, faces a "strategic decision." Either Bush can pursue so-called Plan A, the intensification of his diplomatic campaign, which is centered in the Six Party Talks, to disarm North Korea of its WMD, or so-called plan B, the intensification of efforts to engineer the collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime.

In the early months of his second term, President Bush seemed to waver between plan A and B. Initially, he seemed to lean toward Plan B, especially after North Korea announced on February 10, 2005, that it had nuclear weapons. Vice President Chaney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, newly appointed National Security chief Stephen Hadley and United Nations Ambassador-designated John Bolton argued that diplomacy and the Six Party Talks had failed. Further diplomatic effort would only give North Korea more time to develop its nuclear arsenal, including a nuclear warhead for its ballistic missiles. They urged that the U.S. prepare to give up on the Six Party Talks, given North Korea's refusal to re-engage in them, and instead shift its diplomatic effort to the UN Security Council.

But first, the United States needed more time to re-align its military resources for possible military action against North Korea. This could be done by advocating at the Security Council either a statement by the Security Council's president or passage of a resolution that censured North Korea and demanded its return to the Six Party Talks. Such a move, however, entailed the risk of escalating tensions with North Korea to the point of armed hostilities. North Korea had repeatedly warned that it would consider movement of the nuclear issue to the UN Security Council to be an "act of war."

Apparently, President Bush was reluctant to risk further intensification of North Korean hostility.

### **Strategic Resolve – Tactical Flexibility**

Instead, he authorized newly appointed Secretary of State Rice to redouble efforts to re-start the Six Party Talks. He would continue his resolute pursuit of “CVID,” but would authorize “tactical flexibility.” This meant that U.S. diplomats could offer limited inducements to entice Pyongyang back to the Six Party Talks. Ultimately, Pyongyang quietly agreed that it would consider returning to the talks if the United States would:

- re-open the New York channel for diplomatic communication between Washington and Pyongyang via the DPRK Mission to the United Nations;
- engage in bilateral diplomatic dialogue, and
- if Secretary of State Rice withdrew and apologize for her statement that North Korea is an “out post of tyranny.”

Near the end of April, North Korea was moving toward returning to the Six Party Talks, but then President Bush in an April 28 press conference again called Kim Jong Il a “tyrant.” Another two months of intense quiet diplomacy between Seoul and Pyongyang as well as Washington and Pyongyang ensued.

But at the end of May, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld almost derailed the diplomatic effort. First he authorized the dispatch of F-117 fighter-bombers to South Korea. Although termed routine preparation for a military exercise, Pyongyang saw the move as very provocative. After all, the F-117 fighter bomber has spearheaded all US military offensives since the first Gulf War of 1991. Pyongyang feared that the move might be the prelude to President Bush’s decision to initiate his “other option,” i.e. military action against North Korea.

Within a matter of days, Rumsfeld ordered the end of US joint recovery operations of US military personnel remains left in North Korea during the Korean War. Begun in 1996, these operations teamed small contingents of US Army experts with several dozen North Korean soldiers to search for and recover the remains of US soldiers who had died in North Korea during the Korean War. North Korea considered the presence of US military personnel in North Korea as an informal security assurance since it believed that the United States would not attack while US personnel were in North Korea. Again, the move seemed to convince North Korea’s leadership that the United States was preparing to pursue its “other option.”

Then at the end of May, a ranking DoD official seemed to confirm that the United States was preparing to send the North Korean nuclear issue to the United Nations. Apparently Defense Department Assistant Secretary for East Asia Policy Lawless told American journalists, with Secretary Rumsfeld’s permission, that the United States was indeed preparing to send the North Korean issue to the UN Security Council.

Fortunately, President Bush moved quickly to dismiss this idea. He authorized Secretary of State Rice to curtly dismiss the Defense Department official's comment as not accurately reflecting U.S. policy toward North Korea. Bush's swift action, combined with several telephone calls from the State Department to North Korea's Mission to the United Nations reassured Pyongyang that the U.S. still preferred that North Korea return to the Six Party Talks.

Subsequent diplomatic efforts convinced North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks. These included ROK Minister of Unification Chong Dong-yong's mid-June meetings in Pyongyang with North Korean Kim Jong Il and several meetings in New York between North Korea Deputy Director General for North American Affairs Li Gun with U.S. State Department officials Ambassador Joseph DeTrani and Office of Korea Affairs Director James Foster. In short, cooler heads ultimately prevailed and the Six Party Talks resumed at the end of July.

### **Bush' Strategic Decision**

Obviously, having North Korea participate in the Six Party Talks is insufficient to achieve the six nations' shared goal of a "peaceful diplomatic solution." The fourth round of the talks that concluded on August 7 did not achieve any apparent substantive progress toward a resolution. On the other hand, however, the talks did not fail. All the parties agreed to return to Beijing to resume their diplomatic effort on August 29, 2005. Success or failure is defined by shared goal. In the case of the Six Party Talks, the accent is on achieving a "peaceful diplomatic solution." Thus far the talks have perpetuated peace in Northeast Asia and facilitated diplomatic dialogue, which is essential if a resolution is to be achieved without war.

Ambassador Christopher Hill, the chief U.S. delegate, said he believes some progress was achieved at the fourth round of talks. He said this in an August 9 interview on the American Public Broadcasting System's "News Hour with Jim Lehrer," which is viewed around the world. Hill explained that his numerous meetings with his North Korean counterparts had clarified for him North Korea's position, concerns and preferences regarding the ultimate solution to the nuclear issue. Such clarification is an essential first step toward a "peaceful diplomatic resolution."

Frankly speaking, North Korea has made the strategic decision President Bush has demanded that it make. Pyongyang has declared that it will ultimately give up its nuclear arsenal, return to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation on Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. In exchange, it insists that the United States drop its "hostile policy" and shift to a policy of "peaceful co-existence," formally end the Korean War with a peace treaty and normalize bilateral diplomatic and commercial relations.

But Washington wants more. It demands that North Korea give up all its nuclear programs, both military and civilian, plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Also, it demands that North Korea give up its ballistic missiles, chemical and biological weapons,

and respect the human rights of its citizens. Clearly, this is far more than North Korea is willing to do, at least at the present time.

If the Six Party Talks are to ultimately prove successful, President Bush also must make a strategic decision. Either he must give up his animosity toward North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and his political system, and accept peaceful co-existence with North Korea, or else risk another Korean War which would devastate Northeast Asia and disrupt the international economy. In other words, President Bush cannot get everything he wants. A peaceful diplomatic solution requires compromise by all the concerned parties, not just a single party. President Bush must understand this, or else Northeast Asia could endure its worse nightmare.