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Window for Negotiations is Closing

Prospects are dimming for a diplomatic resolution of escalating nuclear crisis between the United States and North Korea. The Bush Administration continues to refuse to negotiate, in spite of the apparent softening of its rhetoric in recent weeks. Pyongyang meanwhile appears to be toughening its preconditions for negotiations while preparing to defend itself against a perceived, growing U.S. military threat.

Washington's Softened Rhetoric: Washington continues to claim it wants a "peaceful, diplomatic" solution, and its willing to "talk," but without rewarding Pyongyang's misconduct with diplomatic negotiations. On January 14, President Bush excited speculation that he was softening his position when he recalled his June 2001 offer of a "bold initiative." He concluded, "...are we willing to talk to North Korea? Of course we are. But what this nation won't do is be blackmailed." State Department Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, John Bolton in Seoul on January 22 made it clear Bush had not changed his position,

"... if North Korea dismantles its nuclear weapons program, (the President) is prepared to reconsider the possibility of the "bold approach... That approach always involved ... a fundamental change in North Korean behavior – the elimination of its nuclear, chemical, biological weapons and ballistic missile programs, and its outward proliferation behavior, as well as its conventional disposition of forces on the peninsula and its human rights record."

Bush in his January 28 "State of the Union" speech and Secretary Powell in a January 31 address to the World Affairs Councils of America reiterated their willingness to consider the option of negotiating after Pyongyang measured up to US preconditions.

Pyongyang's Stiffening Stance: North Korea continues to insist that the United States first must provide security assurances, proclaim respect for its sovereignty and promise not to interfere in its future economic development. But Pyongyang initiated a series of provocative steps after Washington's December 16 unveiling of its "new" pre-emptive strategy to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, removed seals from key facilities at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and restarted its 5 megawatt nuclear reactor. No longer burdened by international nuclear safeguards, Pyongyang is now "legally" free to pursue its oft proclaimed "sovereign right" to build a nuclear arsenal.

At the same time, Pyongyang has rejected Washington's overtures to begin talks. It labeled Bush's January 14 reference to a "bold initiative" as nothing more than "pie in the sky." North

Korea's official media on January 25 dismissed as unacceptable State Deputy Secretary Armitage's hint of an official document containing security guarantees. The DPRK Foreign Ministry's January 29 statement made this official policy. Its spokesman claimed the, "... the Bush Administration is an untrustworthy rogue group ..." and asserted "... it is important to conclude a non-aggression treaty." The next day, Pyongyang proclaimed Bush's mildly worded "State of the Union" speech a "declaration of aggression."

Pyongyang's references to negotiations have declined as its paranoia has intensified. On January 29, it declared the Korean Peninsula exposed to a "grave threat," and blasted the U.S. "tailored containment" policy as aiming "to isolate and stifle the DPRK by putting it under siege of ...international sanctions ..." Washington was also accused of having "devised a deceptive means of 'dialogue' aimed at gaining time for the projected Iraq attack."

Then came the chilling January 30 *New York Times* report that North Korea had begun moving its 8,000 nuclear spent fuel rods out of storage. Some American observers guessed North Korea was preparing to reprocess the rods to extract their plutonium either for future use in nuclear weapons or to sell on the international black market. Another possible, but largely ignored possibility is that North Korea was relocating the rods to a secret storage bunker to protect them from a possible U.S. air strike similar to the one considered by the Clinton Administration in the spring of 1994 to prevent the rods from being reprocessed by bombing them into high radioactive rubble.

The next day Reuters reported that the Pentagon was considering the reinforcement of U.S. forces in Northeast Asia. Deputy Secretary of State Armitage confirmed this at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's February 4 hearing. He claimed the move would deter any abnormal North Korean military activity while Washington was preoccupied with Iraq. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld the same day said the reinforcement would demonstrate the United States' ability to maintain a resolute military posture in two distant regions at the same time.

Their soothing words belie the buildup's massive scope. Such a large reinforcement has not occurred since the first nuclear crisis peaked in the spring of 1994. The tours of duty for all 37,000 U.S. military personnel in South Korea have been extended for six months. Headquarters and intelligence staffs will be augmented by 2,000 more personnel. US naval power in the region will double when the USS Carl Vinson nuclear aircraft carrier battle group reaches Northeast Asia. It has at least a dozen ships and submarines manned by more than ten thousand sailors and marines and equipped with Aegis and Tomahawk sophisticated weapons systems. Air power will also double with the addition of F-16 "tank killer" fighter bombers and long range B-52 and B-1 bombers capable of "surgical" strikes using "smart bombs."

Pyongyang has reacted predictably. Its official media on January 25 noted the departure of the USS Kitty Hawk nuclear aircraft carrier from its home port near Tokyo, possibly for waters near the Korean Peninsula. Two days later, South Korean presidential envoy Lim Dong-won arrived in

Pyongyang to press for negotiations with Washington, but returned home empty handed. The next day, news of North Korea's movement of the spent fuel rods and Washington's reinforcements happened to leak to the American press. Pyongyang official media commentary suggests its focus is shifting from the pursuit of negotiations to preparations for a war.

None of these developments are conducive to a "peaceful, diplomatic" resolution of the current Korean nuclear crisis.

In the next issue of *The Washington Channel*, we will attempt to decipher Washington and Pyongyang's goals behind the rhetoric and the headlines.