



가 가  
가  
11 2  
가  
(  
가 가  
가  
가  
가  
6  
가

## How Sincere if the US offer to Negotiate with Pyongyang?

Jon B. Wolfsthal

The new US approach to the six-party talks unveiled in Late June is a welcome development, but has left many asking why the Bush administration made the change after 3 years in office. The answer will help determine if real progress is possible, or if the new positive environment will quickly degenerate back into stalemate and instability. In the end, it is just as likely the shift in US tone is driven by domestic US politics and less by the nature of the North Korean threat or developments in the US-ROK alliance.

Showing a secrecy and coordination often lacking over the past few years, the head of the US delegation to the six-party talks in Beijing unveiled a new US position designed to end North

Koreas nuclear program. The outlines of the deal are more detailed than anything laid out by the US in the past and shows two major changes from Washington's previous position in the talks. The first is a clear proposal to endorse providing North Korea with incentives for freezing and eliminating its nuclear program. South Korea and Japan have previously offered Pyongyang incentives if they take steps to abandon their nuclear program, but US officials have opposed such efforts.

The new US position, perhaps accepting a process they cannot prevent, have endorsed the idea of giving North Korea something in return for progress on nuclear issues. The second shift in US policy is more subtle, but reverses the previously and strongly held position by top US officials that Washington would not negotiate with the North in order to obtain compliance with their non-proliferation commitments. Some top US officials, including Vice President Cheney, have previously expressed their beliefs that negotiating with a country they believe to be immoral would condone or further legitimize Pyongyang and have resisted being drawn into a real negotiation with the hard line state. It is now clear that North Korea must reply to the firm offer laid down by the United States which in turn opens the door to a back and forth that could ultimately lead to a final agreement.

But why now? For all of its term in office, the Bush administration all the way up to the President have resisted any changes to US policy toward North Korea. President Bush has even stated that he personally loathes Kim Jong Il and included North Korea as a member of the now famous axis of evil. It is possible that the Bush administration and the President himself have finally recognized that their previous attempts to pressure North Korea into abandoning its nuclear weapon program has failed to produce results.

This administration, however, rarely admits mistakes. Moreover, if a change in policy was ever necessary, it would have come before North Korea moved to acquire enough additional plutonium to produce 4-6 new nuclear weapons. Lastly, some might contend that the Bush administration changed its position only because of a concerted effort by US allies in the region, including South Korea and Japan. Some South Korean officials have openly suggested that Seoul's leverage has increased over the US because of its commitment to ending ROK troops to Iraq as requested by the United States.

All of these ideas are possible, but in the end forget one glaring fact: the US President election is now less than 4 months away and the Bush administration's political position continues to worsen. The continued violence in Iraq and other factors have put President Bush and Democratic Senator John Kerry in a virtual tie. The President's political advisors are desperately hoping to do two things: provide the President with a serious foreign policy victory to outshine the disaster in Iraq and to head off any chance that an event outside of their control before the

election will further undermine their chances for election. While there is little hope that the US proposal in Beijing will result in a quick agreement before the election to end Pyongyangs nuclear program, Bush officials are clearly hoping the chance of an agreement with them will keep North Korea from provoking a crisis before the November 2 election.

North Korea could easily undermine the Presidents position by testing a nuclear weapon or long range missile or exporting plutonium, all moves that would reinforce the fact that despite hard words, the President has allowed North Koreas nuclear program to greatly expand under his watch. Perhaps the President is taking the advice from the movie The Godfather to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. By offering Kim a deal, he hopes to keep him close, at least until the election is over.

We will know which explanation is right if President Bush wins reelection. His policies toward North Korea in 2005 will show if the offer to deal is sincere or simply part of his re-election strategy.

< :

2004. 7. 13>