

# Whither North Korea?

Forum >  
Korea

North Korea is often no more than a blip on the radar screens of international news agencies. However, over the last two years it has attracted more media coverage, as a perfectly manageable crisis over North Korea has been teetering out of control. Usually referred to as the nuclear crisis, and dated back to October 2002, this crisis is far more fundamental and comprehensive than the gradually increasing nuclear bravado of the North, and can be traced back to the coming to power of the Bush administration.

By Koen De Ceuster

Out of a growing concern about and frustration with the confrontational policy of the US government towards North Korea, scholars from the US and around the world united in March 2003 in an 'Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea.' Convinced that political problems 'can only be solved through dialogue, cooperation and active pursuit of peace,' the association is dedicated to 'the promotion of mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of Korea, both North and South.' By providing accurate, historically informed analyses, it seeks to help scholars, students, policy makers, and the general public to learn about Korea, and to contribute to the constructive and peaceful development of US-Korean relations.<sup>1</sup>



George W. Bush on the Korean frontline. North Korean propaganda could not have better choreographed this White House Press Office picture: with the Stars and Stripes up front, and the South Korean flag ominously in the background. Who defends what?

In a similar though unrelated initiative, a panoply of speakers from different national and disciplinary backgrounds, but all motivated by the same concern, gathered late last June in the once divided city of Berlin to ponder the future of North Korea.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the day, the participants left the Berlin symposium with the bewildering feeling that all issues touched upon – famine relief and the humanitarian crisis, economic reform, inter-Korean cooperation and reunification policies, and the nuclear crisis – were conditional on the willingness of the US government to engage North Korea. The key to unlock the gridlock in and over North Korea clearly lies in the White House. Coincidentally, this would have to be the same key that firmly locked the door to any meaningful détente when George W. Bush took over the American presidency in 2001.

## A cold shower during Sunshine

Determined to prove himself the anti-Clinton in foreign policy, George W. Bush abruptly withdrew all contact

with North Korea and ordered a policy review, not unlike the review Bill Clinton had ordered back in 1998. This felt like a cold shower in Korea, following the rapid improvement of inter-Korean relations since the historic June 2000 summit between South Korean president Kim Dae Jung and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. That meeting proved to be the start of a thawing period on the Korean peninsula. The North Korean regime inched forward in its engagement with the outside world, while many allies of South Korea, in line with Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine policy, established diplomatic relations with the North. October 2000 proved a watershed in US-DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) relations with the visit of the first vice chairman of North Korea's National Defence Commission, Vice-Marshal Jo Myong-Rok, to Washington, followed later in that month by a return visit to Pyongyang by American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Short of formal diplomatic recognition, this was the closest the US ever came to acknowledging the DPRK. The swift progress in solving outstanding nuclear and missile proliferation issues was such that even a state visit to Pyongyang by outgoing President Bill Clinton was on the drawing board. The institutional crisis over the American presidential elections, and their eventual outcome, decided differently. The moment the Bush administration took over in Washington, a new chill came over US-DPRK relations. All contacts were put on hold pending a review of the US government's North Korea policy. North Korean gestures of goodwill towards Washington: the prompt official condemnation of the WTC attacks of 11 September, its professed opposition to any form of terrorism, and the North's signing of two UN treaties against terrorism, all went unacknowledged.<sup>3</sup> The visceral dislike for the likes of Kim Jong Il in the White House made the Bush administration up the ante all the time. Any North Korean concession only led to stiffer demands from Washington. Pyongyang's hopes for improved relations with the US were finally dashed on 29 January 2002 when George W. Bush, in his State of the Union address, singled out North Korea as belonging to 'an Axis of Evil', thereby earmarking the North as a potential target for a pre-emptive strike.

## Bluff and rebuff

In October 2002, nearly two years after Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly travelled to the North not so much to reopen a dialogue but to confront the North Koreans on their home turf with 'conclusive' evidence of Pyongyang's secret uranium enrichment programme. He brought the message that Washington would not talk to the North until it had totally and verifiably dismantled this secret programme. Through press leaks orchestrated from

Washington indications first trickled through that Pyongyang had in fact been rebuffed. From the various versions of events now in circulation, it is obvious that the American visit was hardly an attempt at diplomacy. Also clear is that the North Korean delegates did not anticipate such high-handedness. As a (typical) response, they bluffed their way out of it by confirming on the sidelines of the meeting that indeed they had this secret programme going, adding in the same breath that they were willing to negotiate about its dismantling.

As 2002 ended, the situation was getting out of control. What followed was a sequel to the 1992–94 crisis which had ended in the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework. Then as now, suspicions about the exact nature of North Korea's nuclear ambitions had led to a confrontation with the US which was only dispelled following the intervention of former American President Jimmy Carter. The agreement that was eventually brokered offered the North two less proliferation-prone 1,000 MW light water reactors in return for the internationally supervised mothballing of the Yongbyon nuclear complex. The Republican opposition in the American Congress cried appeasement and accession to nuclear blackmail, and tried to block its implementation. The Bush administration lost no time in using the disclosure of the uranium enrichment programme to once and for all derail the Agreed Framework. Despite the recognition of KEDO, the international consortium overseeing the implementation of the Agreed Framework, that the North had scrupulously lived up to the letter of the Agreement (though obviously not the spirit, given its secret uranium enrichment programme), the October disclosure offered the Bush administration the ammunition to blow the much maligned Agreed Framework irretrievably to pieces. Washington stopped the yearly delivery of 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel under the Geneva Agreement, which in turn provoked the North into announcing it did not feel bound by the Agreement anymore. Pyongyang declared its immediate withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled the two IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspectors from the country, broke the seals of the Yongbyon complex and, in April 2003, following another failed attempt at renewing proper dialogue with the US, proclaimed its intention to begin the reprocessing of 8,000 spent fuel rods.

## Cognitive dissonance

This crisis could have been avoided, and the threat of nuclear proliferation could have been contained. The secret uranium enrichment programme that started this renewed nuclear crisis over North Korea was to all accounts up to four years away from maturation. What is more, the North has time and again indicated that it was willing to find a

negotiated solution with Washington.<sup>4</sup> American mismanagement of this crisis, provoked by Washington in the first place, led to the restarting of the Yongbyon nuclear complex and the very real possibility that the North is (capable of) producing nuclear warheads.

However, this is not how this crisis is usually reported. Media follow Washington's lead; news about North Korea is often filed from Washington, where State or Defence Department briefings set the tone. North Korea hardly has a voice, and the voice it has is distorted through a haze of cognitive dissonance. Flustered by the bombastic rhetoric of the North, and unwilling to question the motives behind the US government's policy, no effort is made to understand the intentions of the North. Instead, the media seem to take the image of an immovable, monolithic North Korea frozen in time for granted. Strangely enough, contrary to the customary image of an erratic North Korea, Washington's motives have become hard to gauge. With ongoing squabbles between 'hawks' and 'doves' in the Defence and State Department, the US administration speaks with a split tongue.<sup>5</sup> While publicly paying lip service to South Korea's Sunshine policy of engagement and rapprochement, administration officials in Washington come out in support of an induced collapse of the North Korean regime. Even with the Bush administration currently shifting towards a more accommodating position, it is hard to believe that this is any more than window dressing. The US participates in the Six Party Talks in Beijing with the sole purpose of having the North unconditionally acquiesce to all American demands. While ruling out a military invasion of the North, Washington has made no secret of the fact that its 'Proliferation Security Initiative' is clearly aimed at North Korea, and is second best to an economic blockade, which it cannot enforce. By maintaining this policy confusion, the American government can rest assured that the North will stick to its provocative posturing. Unable to fathom the true intentions of the American administration, the North has no intention to let its guard down. Iraq was a clear reminder that concessions and



Korean reads: 'In case a war of aggression erupts, we will crush the Yankee!' This is standard North Korean bellicose posturing, interesting for its conditionality: war will come to the US, if the US brings war to Korea.

cooperation with this administration can be counterproductive.

With all attention focused on the ongoing international stand-off over North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the Korean people are once again threatened by a renewed deterioration of the food situation. Not so much donor fatigue, as a (renewed) politicization of food aid is menacing the stability that had been reached. The nuclear crisis is also overshadowing the real efforts the North Korean regime is making to implement economic reforms. At the Berlin symposium, the question was 'whither North Korea'; the answer may have to be found in Washington. <

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- 1 See the mission statement of the ASCK, on: [www.asck.org/statement.html](http://www.asck.org/statement.html)
- 2 'Wohin Steuert Nordkorea? Soziale Verhältnisse, Entwicklungstendenzen und Perspektiven', an international symposium organized by the Korea-Verband e.V. (in Asienhaus, Bullmannau 11, 45327 Essen, Germany. [www.korea-verband.de](http://www.korea-verband.de)) on 25 June 2003 in the Centre Monbijou im Haus der Bank für Sozialwissenschaft, Berlin.
- 3 On 12 November 2001, the North Korean representative to the UN, Ri Hyong Chol, signed the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, and the 1979 international convention against hostage taking. Hwang Jang-jin, 'N.K. Signs U.N. Convention on Anti-Terrorism', *The Korea Herald*, 29 November 2001.
- 4 North Korea's voice is seldom heard (undistorted). In Berlin, a very balanced justification of North Korea's right to have a deterrent was read out. See 'Die Berechtigung der DVRK zum Besitz militärischer Abschreckungskraft' (The DPRK's justification for the possession of a military deterrent), a collective document prepared by the Institute for the Reunification of the Fatherland for presentation at the Berlin symposium and included (in German translation) in the (unpublished) symposium materials.
- 5 At the Berlin Symposium, Bruce Cumings spoke on 'North Korea, the Sequel,' addressing the Washington wrangle over some form of North Korea policy. In his upcoming book, *North Korea: The Hermit Kingdom*, New York and London: The New Press, (2003), he paints a tantalizing portrait of North Korea.