

Between Kim Jong Il and a Hard Place

By John Feffer | March 1, 2004

Some presidential candidates have extramarital affairs they hope won't come to light before the elections. Other candidates fear that a past financial indiscretion will be revealed just before Americans go to the polls.

George W. Bush has Kim Jong Il.

The Bush team is desperate for North Korea's nuclear program to simply go away and not blow up in their (and everyone else's) faces before November.

The Six Party Talks that finished a second round this week in Beijing are thus a stopgap measure to prevent North Korean leader Kim Jong Il from ruining George W.'s reelection plans. By guiding the talks to a deadlock, U.S. negotiators are hoping to achieve just what the administration wants: the appearance of a desire to resolve the current crisis.

The once-lunatic far right, which the Bush administration is courting with constitutional amendments and other goodies, views a diplomatic accord with a member of the "axis of evil" as appeasement. However, everyone to the left of Toby Keith, including many prominent Republicans, considers the administration's non-engagement with Kim Jong Il to be one of its most dangerous failures of the past four years.

The second round of Six Party Talks—which brings together China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan as well as the United States and North Korea—was largely a replay of round one from August 2003. The Bush administration remains inflexible on two major issues. It doesn't want to meet North Korea face to face to work out a compromise. (Joseph DeTrani, recently appointed envoy on the North Korean issue, has even been prohibited from talking with the North Korean embassy in New York, something his predecessor Charles Pritchard relied on.) And the administration insists that North Korea freeze its nuclear program first before the United States offers anything.

North Korea has reiterated several times its willingness to freeze its plutonium program, though it retreated in the latest round on a promise to eliminate its civilian nuclear sector. And it is still denying that it has anything even remotely resembling a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, even after recent revelations of Pakistani deals. This is both a half-truth and a negotiating position. North Korea's HEU program is likely to be rudimentary, but it still wants to play coy in order to get something useful in exchange: energy supplies, diplomatic recognition, and/or some assurance from Washington that it won't be bombed back to the Shilla Dynasty.

It is a measure of the distance between the North Korean and U.S. positions that the barest flutter of activity at the Six Party Talks is interpreted positively. The talks were extended beyond their original two-day format—but that is likely because of the intransigence of the two major parties and the near-desperation of the four others to move the process forward. The U.S. delegation met informally with North Korea, but the discussions did not lead anywhere. No one expected a breakthrough. In this atmosphere of near-zero expectations, everyone was simply hoping to get a date for the next round.

Most pundits attribute the glacial pace of negotiations to election-year calculations. The Bush administration is counting on four more years in order to distribute the risk of going after Iran and North Korea. It is hoping that Kim Jong Il will respond to a ratcheting up of pressure by following Libya's lead and making a unilateral declaration. Pyongyang, for its part, is hoping for regime change in Washington and more conciliatory Democrats.

Both sides should reconsider their calculations.

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Although Democratic frontrunner John Kerry has provisionally endorsed bilateral negotiations to end the impasse, the Democratic Party is not eager to appear weak on foreign policy. During the Iraq war deliberations, Democrats repeatedly pointed to North Korea as the real threat that the administration should be addressing with hard-line policies.

If the Bush administration wins a second term, North Korea will not simply knuckle under. Expectations of regime collapse have been around since the late 1980s, and still the regime soldiers on. North Korea may well consider the Libyan model. But Qaddafi's decision came after several years of secret negotiations with the United States. Pyongyang expects no less from Washington. Still, if U.S. attempts to destabilize North Korea are successful—and the policy of economic strangulation, international isolation, and military containment should not be underestimated—the consequences of regime collapse remain the same—a political vacuum in Pyongyang, economic hardship for the region as a whole, a horrific refugee crisis, and weapons of mass destruction up for grabs. None of these scenarios is in the U.S. interest.

To make progress in negotiations with North Korea, either now or after November, Washington has to make a very pragmatic assessment. However maddening it is that Pyongyang has been secretly pursuing an

HEU program, it does not likely have the infrastructure (steady energy supply, sufficiently well-endowed machine sector) to get such a program up and running. Washington should forget the HEU program for the moment and negotiate a freeze of the plutonium facilities which, although archaic, have managed at least to produce fissionable material. Yes, North Korea's human rights record is atrocious, but Washington should let the Europeans take the lead on negotiating progress on this issue. By all means the six-party negotiations should continue. But face-to-face meetings, as in the Libyan scenario, are necessary for both sides to save face and achieve a workable solution.

The crisis in U.S.-North Korean relations is too important to be held hostage to election-year considerations. While the appearance of talking with North Korea may solve the Bush administration's dilemma of avoiding the Scylla of appeasement and the Charybdis of apathy—and thereby enhance George W.'s prospects in November—fruitless negotiations will only put peace further from grasp and war nearer to hand.

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