The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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On the Brink. Prospects for US-DPRK Settlement Dim Again

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Every time it looks as if US-DPRK negotiations are on the verge of a breakthrough someone in Washington throws a spanner in the works. This is what happened in 2005 as the Chinese were forcing through the Joint Statement of 19 September which seemed to put the negotiations, under the aegis of the Six Party Talks, on a course for a successful resolution. The US Treasury designated the Macau bank used by North Korean entities (and British companies and joint ventures in DPRK), Banco Delta Asia, as a "Primary Money Laundering Concern under USA PATRIOT Act". [1] Although the allegations were subsequently discredited, partly through the investigative reporting of the US chain McClatchy Newspapers, the action put the Six Party Talks in limbo for over a year, as well as having a serious impact on DPRK foreign trade, and hence on the economy itself, which reportedly shrank 1.1% in 2006. [2] Negotiations between US Under Secretary of State Christopher Hill and DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan resulted in a couple of agreements in 2007, one in February the other in October, which seemed to offer a way forward.[3]These hopes have been dashed and prospects at the moment look dim.

Under the agreements, by the end of 2007 the United States was to remove the DPRK from its Terrorism List and the Trading with the Enemy Act, both of which erect considerable barriers against North Korea's exports, participation in international bodies such as the World Bank, and ability to attract foreign investment. The US was also to provide its share of 'economic, energy and humanitarian assistance up to the equivalent of' one million tons of heavy fuel oil. For its part the DPRK was to 'dismantle' its Yongbyon reactor and associated facilities — the source for the plutonium for its nuclear weapons — and 'provide a complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear programs.' It also 'reaffirmed its commitment not to transfer nuclear materials, technology, or know-how.' [4]

According to American reports, the DPRK moved with such alacrity to disable the Yongbyon reactor that there were concerns for safety and the Koreans were asked to slow down. [5] American officials also expressed satisfaction with the high level of cooperation they were receiving from the Koreans.

The Yongbyon reactor

Deadline of 31 December 2007

However, 31 December came and went. The deliveries of heavy fuel oil were way behind schedule. As late as 6 February 2008, Hill admitted that only one fifth of the oil had been delivered. [6] More ominously, the US made no moves to honour its commitment on the sanctions legislation. [7] In response the DPRK slowed down the disablement of Yongbyon. Washington put it about that Pyongyang had not provided the promised declaration, a line which is frequently echoed in the media to this day. [8] On 4 January 2008, the DPRK Foreign Ministry issued a statement 'on Issue of Implementation of October 3 Agreement'' in which it said, inter alia:

> As far as the nuclear declaration on which wrong opinion is being built up by some quarters is concerned, the DPRK has done what it should do.

> The DPRK worked out a report on the nuclear declaration in November last year and notified the U.S. side of its contents.
>
> It had a sufficient consultation with the U.S. side after receiving a request from it to have further discussion on the contents of the report.
>
> When the U.S. side raised "suspicion" about uranium enrichment, the DPRK allowed it to visit some military facilities in which imported aluminum tubes were used as an exception and offered its samples as requested by it, clarifying with sincerity that the controversial aluminum tubes had nothing to do with the uranium enrichment.
>
> As far as the fiction about nuclear cooperation with Syria is concerned, the DPRK stipulated in the October 3 agreement that "it does not transfer nuclear weapons, technology and knowledge". This is our answer to this question.
>
> This was also done in line with the prior discussion with the U.S. side. [9]

Little attention was paid in the media to the claim that the declaration, drafted 'in discussion with the US side (i.e. Hill) had been submitted in November, long before the deadline. Hill himself, in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 6 February, surely went beyond being economical with the truth when he said, "While we have had discussions of a declaration with the DPRK, the DPRK did not meet the December 31, 2007 deadline for this commitment, and we have still not received such a declaration." [10]

The DPRK position was clarified and confirmed by the visit of a high-level, non-official US group to the DPRK 12-16 February 2008. The group was composed of Siegfried S. Hecker, a nuclear scientist who is a former director of Los Alamos National Laboratory and currently co-director of the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, Joel Witt, a former State Department official who had been part of the team negotiating the Agreed Framework back in 1994, and W. Keith Luse, an assistant to Senator. Richard L. Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. [11] Not Bush's men, but representative of the mainstream, midstream, elite. They reported that disablement had been slowed down because of the delay in providing oil, and the failure to remove DPRK from the Terrorism List, and Trading with the Enemy Act. [12] They also reported that the Koreans were embittered that they had given American officials special access to a missile factory and allowed them to take away aluminium tubes that the US claimed were for uranium enrichment, but that the Americans had not accepted this as definitive evidence that they had no such programme. Indeed, US scientists were to claim that they had found 'traces of enriched uranium on the samples'. [13]

This was rather curious. Why had the Koreans given those samples to the Americans if they had been used for uranium enrichment? One obvious explanation is that they had so used them but thought they had removed the evidence. It is likely that the Americans have much more sensitive equipment than the Koreans and may have picked up things which escaped the Koreans. However, doubts remain. There seems to have been no independent testing and the samples were not handed over to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for verification. Significantly as we shall see, the IAEA was prevented from investigating the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor until the public release of the CIA video seven months after the Israeli bombing made it impossible to keep them out any longer. Scientific tests carried out under conditions of political pressure, and the reporting of them, are always dubious. One instance is particularly relevant. In 2004 the Japanese government claimed that DNA tests on a corpse claimed by North Korea to be that of the abducted Yokota Megumi proved that they were not her remains. The British scientific journal Nature subsequently revealed that the tests were inconclusive. [14] In addition the US has a poor track record in these matters; it has repeatedly lied not merely about Iraq but also about North Korea.. In 2005, for instance, the Washington Post disclosed that Washington had misled Japan and South Korea with claims that Pyongyang had exported nuclear material to Libya. [15]

The aluminium tubes story has an added twist to it. Christopher Hill said that the samples had been brought out from Pyongyang in the suitcases of American diplomats. [16] Would they really have been so cavalier if they strongly suspected enriched uranium?

The Hecker visit confirmed that, despite media reports, Pyongyang had submitted its declaration, but there remained three issues of contention between the two sides – the amount of plutonium the Koreans had extracted from the Yongbyon reactor, the question of nuclear cooperation with Syria, and enriched uranium. The declaration has not been made public and Hecker's report is the best thing we have in the public domain on the issues, although he is, of course, coming at it from an American perspective. [17] He has no doubts that the US has a god-given right to nuclear weapons but that this indulgence does not extend to North Koreans.

Hecker briefing the press following the visit

Hecker is not alone in this, of course, and it is useful to set this assumption of American exceptionalism in context. Despite the rhetoric about 'making the world a safer place', 'upholding international law', and, in the words of Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute, removing the 'danger it [North Korea] poses not only to its population but to the entire civilized world,' US policy is based on old-fashioned realpolitik. [18] As the People's Daily has recently pointed out, 'the U.S. is still the owner of the world's largest nuclear weapons arsenal, nor do they change "the capability to incinerate all of our enemies on 15 minutes' notice". [19] The article decried 'the U.S. nuclear ambition to dominate the world' and called for it to comply with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT):

> The U.S., as a dominant nuclear power, could be truly beneficial for world peace and security if it dismantles nuclear weapons in large scale, stops the missile defense system, and ratifies the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. [20]

The US is unlikely to follow this Chinese advice because it wants to preserve, to the extent possible, its superiority in nuclear terror, irrespective of its commitments under the NPT. It can be argued that the US, given its huge superiority in conventional arms, would be better off implementing its NPT obligations, and by so doing bringing the other nuclear powers, including India, Pakistan, and Israel, into the fold. But that is another story.

At the moment the US is insisting on its right to possess nuclear weapons and support the nuclear weapons status of friends such as Britain, India, and Israel, while denying that right to countries such as North Korea and Iran. This is in contravention of natural justice, the charter of the United Nations (which recognises the equal right of sovereign states to self-defense), and in some cases (India, Israel) the NPT. However, it is unusual to admit such realpolitik openly. Fortunately for the US government, its rhetoric is seldom challenged. Seldom, but sometimes. There was an interesting, if inconclusive, exchange between Christopher Hill

and an unnamed Associated Press reporter at an interview in Jakarta in April:

> QUESTION: Talk to us more generally. The United States also has nuclear weapons. Has that been ever brought up in your talks? Does it make it hard for you to argue that North Korea and Iran can't have nuclear weapons while the United States has so many?
>
> ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, I mean -- Frankly, you cannot begin to talk about the differences in the history and the country. So, no, in answer to you, it does not come up. What does come up from time is the North Koreans say, "Well, country X has nuclear weapons, why can't we?" Well, the fact is, if you look at you look at Northeast Asia, if you look at the Korean Peninsula, you can pretty quickly -- I think within a few seconds, frankly -- understand why it's very dangerous, very destabilizing for North Korea to be holding on to nuclear weapons. So, what of the thinking that country X or country Y or country Z has nuclear weapons, and why can't they? The fact of the matter is, it's very destabilizing, and frankly it is hurting North Korea profoundly. And I hope that they will come to understand that and give this thing up and get on with life.
>
> QUESTION: But the United States would never give up theirs. Why is that?
>
> ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, I think it's a broad question. But the whole issue of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the role of nuclear states under Article VI to begin a process of reducing arsenals, this is something we actually worked on with the Soviet Union and then with the Russians. So, you know, there has been some build-down in arsenals, and I am sure in the future as we continue to work with other nuclear states, there'll also be build-down.
>
> But I would really caution you in thinking this is somehow related to the fact that we have a country, North Korea, that has a myriad of problems and yet here they are trying to develop nuclear weapons. [21]

Perhaps in despair at not getting a straight answer, but more likely in deference to power, the reporter pursued the issue no further but turned instead to the subject of rising rice prices.

The three issues that are imperilling progress on US-DPRK negotiations are quite different in their nature and their ramifications.

Plutonium

The Koreans have declared a certain amount of plutonium but it is reported to be below US estimates. How far below? Former US weapons inspector David Albright suggests not very far:

> According to media reports, this declaration stated that North Korea had a separated plutonium stockpile of 30 kilograms and denied that it had a uranium enrichment program.

Does this quantity of separated plutonium make sense? Yes. In short, 30 kilograms is at the lower end of the range of plutonium that we have assessed North Korea could have separated. This estimate is based on what we know about how long its reactor operated to build up plutonium in the fuel rods and how much plutonium was chemically extracted from this fuel at the nearby reprocessing plant. [22]

This is not a numbers game which is susceptible to conclusive proof. Neither side can prove its case, although the Koreans have come close to that by agreeing to release thousands of pages of documents stretching back to 1990 which covers the period preceding the signing of the Agreed Framework. [23] Critics of the Agreed Framework have long argued that whilst it stopped further generation of plutonium it did not address the issue of existing stock. [24] This was sufficient, it was claimed, for one or two bombs. [25] If there was an undeclared stock, the amount was small and Albright estimates that 'The vast majority of North Korea's separated plutonium—at least 80 percent but perhaps as much as 99 percent—was produced since the North Korea's freeze on production and reprocessing ended in late 2002', that is since the Bush administration killed off the Agreed Framework with its uranium allegations. [26] However, if there is still a discrepancy between what the Koreas admit and what they have it is small, measured in a few kilograms and dwarfed not merely by the US holdings, but also by Japan's 45 tonnes. [27]

The Syrian affair

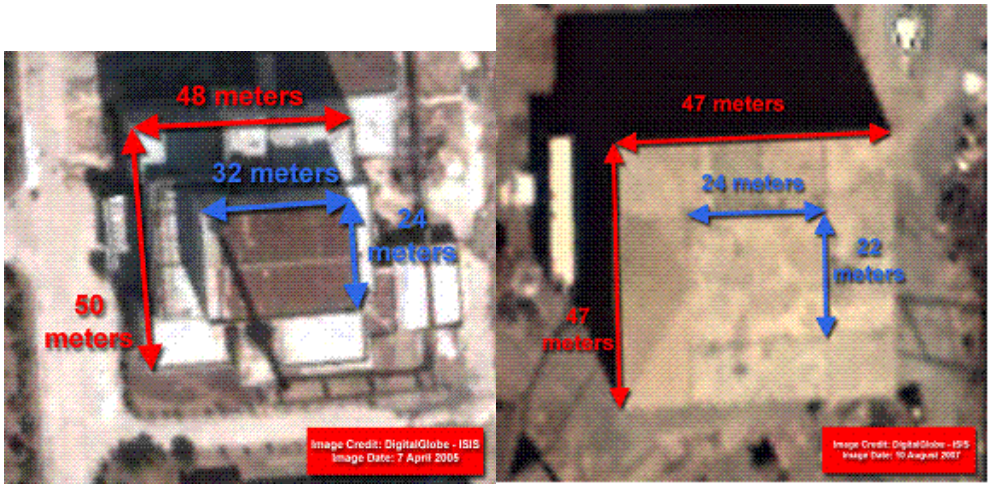
Then there is the very strange case of the alleged nuclear cooperation with Syria. On 6 September 2007 the Israeli Air Force bombed a building in Syria. Initially neither country, nor the US, said much about the event, but stories were leaked to the press that the Israelis claimed the target had been a nuclear reactor, and one constructed with North Korean help. [28] There was a plethora of stories, often contradictory, over the coming weeks but little in the way of officials statements from Israel, Syria or the United States. President Bashar al-Assad broke silence in a BBC interview on 1 October when he said the Israelis had hit an 'unused military building'. [29] The Israelis followed with a statement the next day which made no mention of a nuclear facility, merely saying that they had attacked a 'military target'.[30]

Although the 'Syrian issue' surfaced in reports of US-DPRK negotiations over the following months, it appeared as if the State Department was not particularly concerned and did not want it to disturb more substantive matters. Indeed, Hill went ahead and signed the Six Party agreement of 3 October 2007 which did not mention the word Syria but merely gave a general DPRK assurance on non-proliferation – 'The DPRK reaffirmed its commitment not to transfer nuclear materials, technology, or know-how.' [31]

In February 2008 the New Yorker published a lengthy piece by the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh which concluded that the target had not been a nuclear facility but more probably (but not certainly) a missile factory built with North Korean assistance. The raid, he argued, was not only aimed at Syria, but also Iran –'There is evidence that the preëmptive raid on Syria was also meant as a warning about—and a model for—a preëmptive attack on Iran'. [32] Elsewhere Hersh has argued that the Bush administration wanted a settlement with the DPRK to 'clear the decks' for an attack on Iran. [33]

From the date of the raid in September 2007 up to April 2008 the US government said little of substance about the affair. On 15 April Ed Royce, the senior Republican on the House foreign affairs subcommittee on terrorism, non-proliferation and trade was reported as complaining 'that the administration had not provided Congress with sufficient information about those allegations.'[that North Korea had helped Syria construct a nuclear reactor]. [34] Then on 23 April it was announced that the CIA would hold 'closed, classified briefings for members of several congressional committees' the following day. [35] In the event the video which was shown at the briefing was publicly released. [36] The White House also issued a statement which demanded that 'The Syrian regime must come clean before the world regarding its illicit nuclear activities' and claimed 'We have long been seriously concerned about North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its proliferation activities. North Korea's clandestine nuclear cooperation with Syria is a dangerous manifestation of those activities.' [37]

The video, and its release, inevitably raised questions. Why the long delay? Why now? [38] Although White House statements denied that the event would impact on the Six Party Talks, and President Bush even claimed that it was designed to advance them, it was clear that this was not so and it was widely considered that the video would hamper negotiations, and was designed to do so. . Some papers attempted to skirt round this; the Washington Post, for instance, stated that 'the discovery (sic) of North Korean ties to the facility has complicated U.S. efforts to get the country to give up nuclear weapons.' [39] This implies that that the US was compelled release fresh information in April even though it would unfortunately 'complicate' things. But the United States had not 'discovered' anything new in April 2008 it merely publicly disclosed what it claimed to have know since September 2007, if not before.



North Korean and Syrian reactor buildings. A smoking gun?

"We also wanted to advance certain policy objectives through the disclosures, and one would be to the North Koreans to make it abundantly clear that we, we may know more about you than you think," Mr. Bush claimed. [40] But if the Americans really had robust evidence of DPRK nuclear assistance to Syria why wait seven months before confronting the Koreans? Why sign the agreement of 3 October 2007? Why hadn't they privately briefed the other members of the Six Party Talks and Congress? And, in particular, why hadn't they (and Israel) not informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as the United States, at least, was legally bound to do? The Washington Post pointed out that 'as a member of the U.N. Security Council, the United States is obligated to report evidence that other states are violating international law against nuclear proliferation.' [41] It might have added that the US has seldom been loathe to make accusations before, so why in this case? One result of the failure to report to the IAEA was that verification has become difficult if not impossible. [42] Which, if Hersh is right and the building was not a reactor, might be a good reason for delay in reporting until the building was destroyed and the Syrians had cleared away the debris.

The hapless Director General of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, who has so often been caught between US policy and his duty to the United Nations, issued a statement in which he deplored 'the fact that this information was not provided to the Agency in a timely manner' and lamely declared that 'in light of the above, the Director General views the unilateral use of force by Israel as undermining the due process of verification that is at the heart of the non-proliferation regime.' [43] This was tame language indeed considering that Israeli's bombing of a neighbouring sovereign state was illegal and that Israel, with its unacknowledged but barely concealed nuclear weapons has long cocked a snoot at the NPT and the IAEA. [44] Another former US weapons inspector, Scott Ritter, does think the building was a reactor, but for peaceful purposes. He has argued that while Israel's action was illegal and the US endorsement of it displayed the Bush administration's customary disregard of 'truth and adherence to international law', Syria was in compliance with its obligations to the IAEA. [45]

Commentators who cared to look usually saw Vice President Cheney as the architect of the video showing. Jang Jungsoo Executive editor of the Liberal Seoul daily Hankyoreh observed:

> American neocons like Vice President Dick Cheney and Israeli hawks like former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, do not want to see Golan returned to Syria. They are even opposed to reconciliation with Syria. American neocons and Israeli hawks are belligerent in their thinking, as they want to topple Syria with military force and use an air strike to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities.
>
> It needs to be remembered that the accusations about a connection between Pyongyang and Damascus came right when serious progress was being made on peace between Israel and Syria, and right after the tentative agreement between the United States and North Korea was reached in Singapore.
>
> It was immediately after an agreement was reached at the six-party talks in 2005 that elements associated with Cheney in the U.S. Treasury Department froze North Korean money in Macao's Banco Delta Asia, and the agreement fell apart. [46]

Certainly the decision to release the video was made by the White House and the CIA, while the State Department, and specifically Hill, was at pains to play it down, saying that the deal with Pyongyang would go ahead. [47] Just as last year there was an open battle in Washington between the Treasury and the State Department, now it would seem that, not for the first time, there is a struggle between the White House, principally Cheney, and the State Department, or at least those who want to negotiate:

> The timing of the administration's decision to declassify information about the Syrian project has raised widespread suspicions, especially in the State Department, that Vice President Dick Cheney and other administration hawks were hoping that releasing the information might undermine a potential deal with North Korea that would take it off an American list of state sponsors of terrorism. [48]

One of the reasons for Cheney's resurgence has been the perceived success of the 'surge' in Iraq and the lack of any real criticism of the administration's foreign policy by the Democratic presidential contenders. It just so happened that a few days before the Syria video the New York Times published a long article, the culmination of years of research, exposing the way the Pentagon corruptly and with calculation used the 'military analysts' who pontificate on American TV to mislead the public.

> To the public, these men are members of a familiar fraternity, presented tens of thousands of times on television and radio as "military analysts" whose long service has equipped them to give authoritative and unfettered judgments about the most pressing issues of the post-Sept. 11 world.
>
> Hidden behind that appearance of objectivity, though, is a Pentagon information apparatus that has used those analysts in a campaign to generate favorable news coverage of the administration's wartime performance, an examination by The New York Times has found.
>
> The effort, which began with the buildup to the Iraq war and continues to this day, has sought to exploit ideological and military allegiances, and also a powerful financial dynamic: Most of the analysts have ties to military contractors vested in the very war policies they are asked to assess on air. [49]

This brings us to the more fundamental question of whether the video was credible. What, if anything, did it prove? Was this another exercise in deception?

Many journalists uncritically reported US allegations as ‘revelations’, others, more professionally but in reality no more challenging, used quotations marks and other devices to give a semblance of objectivity. [50]

However, the ‘evidence’ was, at best, circumstantial, especially in relation to North Korea. There was no ‘smoking gun’. There was a photo of a North Korean nuclear scientist Chon Chibu, in a track suit, standing beside his Syrian counterpart, on what appeared to be a sightseeing day in Syria, and it was claimed there was a similarity in shape between the Syrian building and the Yongbyon reactor. [51]

The Syrians made the obvious comparison with Iraq:

> Imad Moustapha, Syrian ambassador to the US, called the charges “fantasy”, saying the Bush administration had a “record about fabricating stories about other countries’ WMD [weapons of mass destruction]”. [52]

Those on the liberal/left side of the spectrum found the ‘evidence’ unconvincing, as did those, more to the centre. [53] The Canadian journalist Eric Margolis, for one, made the connection between the Syria video and the New York Times story about the Pentagon:

> Meanwhile, Cheney and allies in Congress and the media are also using the Syrian reactor hubbub to undermine efforts by the U.S. state department, a primary hate object for neocons, to implement the nuclear weapons freeze with North Korea....
>
> As the latest furor builds over the nefarious North Korea, we should remember that this scare story comes from the same Washington fib factory that manufactured all the alarms and "evidence" about Saddam Hussein's non-existent weapons of mass destruction and links to al-Qaida.
>
> North Koreans are pretty scary, but their nuclear capabilities and the threat they supposedly pose have been exaggerated. South Korea and European intelligence agencies, for example, are cautious about Washington's claims about North Korea and Syria.
>
> The New York Times revealed last week what this column has long said: The Pentagon has duped Americans and Canadians by organizing a bunch of retired U.S. generals -- mislabelled "independent military experts" -- to shill for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Watch these rent-a-generals again prostitute themselves on TV by promoting the administration's party line about the great Syrian nuclear menace. [54]

However, what was more telling was the scepticism in the mainstream press. For instance, both the Guardian and the Washington Post ran pieces casting some doubt on the US allegations and pointing out inconsistencies. [55] But it was the Financial Times, no less, that joined the Syrian ambassador in referring to the past to cast doubt on the present in an editorial entitled ‘The curious Syrian nuclear affair’:

> Just over five years ago, a US secretary of state, Colin Powell, made more than two dozen claims to the United Nations Security Council about Iraq’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. In the build-up to war, many found it a compelling performance. But all Mr Powell’s assertions were subsequently shown to be without foundation. He might as well have shown the world a video game.
>
> Not long after that, Israel started hawking “evidence” uncovered by its spies that Saddam Hussein had moved his WMD to Syria. It got some takers – but nothing more has been heard of this chimera.
>
> Thursday’s Central Intelligence Agency presentation to the US Congress – making the case that North Korea supplied Syria with a nuclear reactor able to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons – was also compelling. It would also appear to justify retroactively the Israeli air strike on the site in Syria’s eastern desert last September. But given the US and Israel’s recent record in these matters, it could also be just another dog and pony show. [56]

Who indeed would buy such a used car from such a team? Ironically, both the DPRK and the US share a common problem on this and similar issues, though from different angles. If North Korea had not transferred nuclear technology to Syria, it cannot ‘prove’ that, because as Rumsfeld himself pointed out, "You can't prove a negative". [57] The Americans, on the other hand, are unable to prove the transfer with their video both because of lack of substance in it, and lack of credibility.

The Syrian business is very murky but it would seem that the bombing, of whatever it was, was an Israeli message to Syria and Iran. It may have had something to do with blocking a Turkish-brokered rapprochement between Israel and Syria. The allegations about North Korea were probably thrown in to lock the US into things. This was subsequently taken up by hardliners in the US, and specifically Cheney, it was widely assumed, to derail the Six Party Talks. [58] This was a long struggle, and the showing of the video was a neocon victory, but so far at best a partial one. The Six Part Talks continue and are expected to be reconvened by the end of May. [59]

Alleged uranium enrichment programme

However, curious as it may seem, the Syria issue really relates to US (and Israeli) Middle East policy and its connection with DPRK is peripheral. The enriched uranium programme issue is different, because it strikes at the heart of Bush administration policy towards the DPRK. It was the allegation about uranium that the administration used in 2002 to break out of the despised Agreed Framework that the preceding Clinton administration had signed. [60] It must have seemed a good idea at the time. Official statements, and leaks to the press asserted that the Americans had caught the Koreans ‘cheating’ and so had good reason to break the agreement. It was claimed that the administration had solid evidence from Pakistan. [61] It was also claimed that the Koreans had ‘confessed’. The State Department spokesperson assured the media:

> During those talks [in Pyongyang October 2002], Assistant Secretary James A. Kelly and his delegation advised the North Koreans that we had recently acquired information that indicates that North Korea has a program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons in violation of the Agreed Framework and other agreements. North Korean officials acknowledged that they have such a program. [62]

There was a flurry of articles analysing this strange ‘confession’. [63] Even the British anti-nuclear campaign group CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) naively bought the story, announcing on its website that ‘towards the end of 2002 the DPRK revealed that it had produced highly enriched uranium’ [64]

The Koreans said at the time that the Americans had produced no evidence of a uranium programme and that Kelly had ‘Framed up Admission Story’. [65] Few listened, or even bothered to look at what the Koreans were saying.

However, the confidence evinced in 2002 has long since virtually evaporated. Scepticism about US allegations in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq have played their part. There has been a realisation, in some quarters at least, that the ‘disclosures’ that had come out of Pakistan were not so solid after all. It will be recalled that the United States, in order to invade Afghanistan, had first to secure Pakistan by, it is reported, a mixtures of bribes and intimidation. Even, according to President Pervez Musharraf, the US has been threatening to bomb Pakistan "back to the stone age". [66] One result of this, according to veteran journalist Selig

Harrison, is the possibility:

> ...that Musharraf changed his position on the centrifuges and invented the "facts" in his memoir to curry favor with the Bush administration; by strengthening its case against North Korea, in this view, he hoped to offset dissatisfaction in Washington with his ineffectual performance in combating al-Qaeda and the Taliban. [67]

By 2007 it was apparent that the State Department, and specifically Christopher Hill, was back-tracking on the uranium claims, much to the public anger of hardliners such John Bolton, and presumably the more private anger of Dick Cheney. [68] Hill, and the chief U.S. intelligence officer for North Korea, Joseph R. DeTrani, admitted in testimony to Congress that there was only "mid-confidence" about the programme. [69] In January, it was reported, Hill 'said that U.S. officials had largely concluded that thousands of aluminum tubes acquired by North Korea in 2002 -- which sparked the intelligence finding that Pyongyang was building a large-scale uranium-enrichment program -- were not currently being used to create fissile material.' [70]

It might appear that the US acknowledgement that the DPRK did not have a current (and by implication future) enrichment programme suitable for weapons production would remove the barrier to settlement. But the past haunts the administration. Was there an enrichment program in the past that justified the administration's ditching of the Agreed Framework? This is an important question because, as both the American media, and the DPRK Foreign Ministry have pointed out, it was this action which led North Korea to test a nuclear device. [71]

There appears to be no evidence that a uranium weapons programme ever existed. There have been plenty of allegations, and suspicions, but little beyond that. [72] The alleged 'traces' of enriched uranium found on the sample tubes that Hill secured, even if true, do not prove, or even indicate, such a programme. Clearly Hill (and through him, the Koreans) is in a difficult position. If he accepts DPRK assurance that there was no programme, this is virtually tantamount to admitting that his predecessor, James Kelly, and Kelly's superiors, including Secretary Powell, Vice-President Cheney, and President Bush were either lying or negligent in using false intelligence. Shades, of course, of Iraq. However, in this case, the sterilisation of the past impacts on the present. Many, such as Hecker, argued that it was foolish to fuss unduly about a possible uranium programme in the past at the risk of imperilling the removal of the actual plutonium programme, which was the source of the Koreans nuclear weapons. [73] Clearly senior people in the administration thought that risk worth taking to cover themselves against possible charges that they had caused North Korea to acquire nuclear weapons using the same sort of disinformation campaign that they had used over Iraq.

The Koreans, for their part, would be foolish to admit to such a programme if they did not have it. Even if they did have a programme in the past, which is unlikely, they know the Americans have no evidence, so again an admission would be foolish. Admittedly, in these circumstances an acknowledgement would get the Americans off their back, and get the talks moving ahead, but they would be building up problems for the future. This is not a government with a short electoral cycle and they are unlikely to embrace short-term gain at the expense of long-term danger.

Faced with this dilemma, the declaration which the DPRK is required to submit under the agreement of 3 October 2007 takes on huge significance. It is no longer reality that matters, but the words, and much time has been spent in fashioning them. Hill's desperation is evident in recent reports:

> North Korea has repeatedly denied having a uranium-enrichment program or providing nuclear expertise or materials to Syria. But Mr. Hill has been trying to get North Korea to at least acknowledge such (sic) the validity of such suspicions, according to officials in Seoul, who spoke on the condition of anonymity given the delicacy of the talks. [74]

To get the North Koreans to 'acknowledge the validity of suspicions' is a long way from the self-righteous and arrogant statements of five years ago. The declaration will remain secret but will be disclosed to the other four parties at the Beijing talks, and to Congress, or selected members of it. No doubt much will be leaked.

After the meeting in Singapore on 8 April between Christopher Hill and Kim Kye-gwan, an unnamed diplomatic source was quoted as saying of the declaration (which covered Syria as well as uranium)— "The wording in the declaration will probably persuade the U.S. Congress." [75]

On 18 April the New York Times carried an interesting story which described some of the fighting going on in Washington:

> The Bush administration appears to be preparing to back away from a demand that North Korea fully disclose all of its past nuclear weapons activities, in an attempt to preserve a nuclear agreement requiring it to disclose and dismantle the bulk of its nuclear weapons program.
>
> As described by administration officials on Thursday, the step would relax a demand for North Korea to admit fully that it supplied Syria with nuclear technology. The United States would also agree to postpone its demand that North Korea provide an immediate and full accounting of its fledgling uranium program. ....
>
> The new approach has been endorsed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her chief North Korea negotiator, Christopher R. Hill, an assistant secretary of state, who have argued that getting the plutonium program shut down was better than getting nothing at all, an administration official said. But it is being opposed by conservatives within the administration, including aides to Vice President Dick Cheney, officials said. ...
>
> Under the new approach, the United States and North Korea have settled on fudging the issue, [Syria] administration officials said. North Korea will "acknowledge" that the United States is concerned about the nuclear proliferation to Syria but will not publicly admit to it. North Korea will also promise not to engage in any more nuclear proliferation, a senior administration official said.
>
> In return, the United States would take North Korea off the list of state sponsors of terrorism and the list of countries noted in the Trading With the Enemy Act. [76]

Then the following week, came the Cheney counterattack, with the release of the video on Syria. Why the focus on Syria? Partly perhaps to divert attention from the uranium issue. Here Cheney shares a common desire with Hill, who is focussing on plutonium, so that the embarrassing uranium issue can be skated over. [77] Another advantage of the Syria focus is that Israel has many friends in Congress who would be unlikely to query anything coming from Israeli intelligence.

It is important not to exaggerate the significance of the video itself. There has been plenty of opposition in Congress, and throughout the American political elite, to accepting the declaration and complying with the agreement of 3 October. [78]

Prospects for a settlement

It is uncertain what will happen.

Pyongyang is clearly desperate to reach a settlement with Washington. [79] The key to economic revival is the lifting of US sanctions and the barriers to exports, accessing international financial institutions and attracting foreign investments, and removing the military threat. In short the normalisation of relations promised, but not (yet) delivered, by the Agreed Framework. Short term there is heavy fuel oil and other forms of assistance, and in the medium term the provision of light

water reactors. The food situation is rapidly worsening, exacerbated by rising international prices, and there are mounting predictions of another famine. [80] To negotiate peaceful coexistence with the United States is absolutely essential.

True, the Six Party Talks, as noted above, are reportedly to reconvene by the end of May. However, Beijing is not where the important battles take place, it is Washington. Here the signs are ominous. David Sanger reported in the New York Times on 24 April:

> But Mr. Hill has argued in private that the Syrian episode and the uranium enrichment are side shows, and that the critical issue is stopping North Korea from producing more plutonium and giving up what it has. But his State Department colleagues say that he has been told not to defend the deal, or even explain it. "He's feeling pretty abandoned by Rice and Bush," one of his colleagues said Wednesday. Mr. Hill did not respond to messages. [81]

If Hill really has been 'abandoned' by Rice then prospects for progress are indeed dim. [82] Why Rice might have done this is open to conjecture. Certainly the new conservative, pro-American government in South Korea is taking off pressure from that quarter. The situation in the Middle East, and the state of the presidential election, may have led her to believe that a settlement with North Korea is no longer so useful. She may be looking four years ahead, and making her calculations. Whatever the reasons for choosing one course or another, her position is crucial. If she supports Hill there is a possibility, but not a certainty, that the administration will accept a degree of peaceful coexistence with North Korea and move forward on negotiations. Is she turns her back, then the negotiations will stall and the prospects for North Korea, and indeed for South Korea which cannot decouple itself from its sibling, will be dire.

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He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted on May 8, 2008.

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