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 led by North Korea has been referred to as the nuclear crisis, and dated back to October 2002, this crisis is far more fundamental and comprehensive than the generally increasing nuclear bravado of the North, and can be traced back to the coming to power of the Bush administration.

North Korea: The Hermit Kingdom

By Keen De Ceuster

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**A cold shower during Sunlight**

**North Korea**

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 Clint- on had ordered back in 1998. This felt like a return to the North Korea, following the rapid improvement of inter-Korean relations since the historic June 2000 summit between South Korean presi- dent Kim Dae Jung and the North Korean leader Kim Jong II. That meeting proved to be the start of a thawing peri- od on the Korean peninsula. The North Korean resolution was foredward in its engagement with the outside world, while many allies of South Korea, in line with Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine pol- icy, established diplomatic relations with the North. October 2000 proved to be a watershed in US-DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) relations with the visit of first vice chairman of North Korea’s National Defence Commission, Vice-Marshal Jo Myong- Rok, to Washington, followed later in that month by President Clinton’s visit to Pyongyang by American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Short of for- mal 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 institution- al crisis over the American presidential elections, and their eventual outcome, decided differently. The moment the Bush administration took over in Wash- ington, a new chill came over US- DPRK relations. All contacts were put on hold pending a review of the US govern- ment’s North Korea policy. North Korea’s voice is seldom heard (undistorted). In Berlin, a very balanced image of an immovable, monolithic North Korea was dispelled following the intervention of former American President Jimmy Carter. The agreement that was eventual- ly brokered offered the North two new pro- liferation-proof 1,000 MW- light water reactors in return for the internationally supervised dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear complex. The Republic was opposed to the Amended Korean Congress appropriation and access- sion 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- ized consortium overseeing the implemen- tation 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 pro- gramme), the October disclosure offered the Bush administration the ammunition to blow the much maligned Agreement into irretriev- able pieces. Washington stopped the yearly delivery of 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel under the Geneva Agree- ment, 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 (Internation- al Atomic Energy Agency) inspectors from the country, broke the seals of the Yongbyon complex, and, in April 2003, followed the Agreed Framework attempt at renewing proper dialogue with the US, proclaimed its intention to begin the reprocessing of 8,000 spent fuel rods.

**Bluff and reffub**

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 confirm that the North was at least at home turf with ‘conclusive’ evidence of Pyongyang’s secret uranium enrich- ment programme. He brought the mes- age that the US had nothing more to talk about with the North until it had totally and verifi- ably dismantled this secret programme. Through press leaks orchestrated from Washington indications first trickled through that Pyongyang had in fact been rebuffed. From the various ver- siions of events now in circulation, it is obvious that the American side was hardly an attempt at diplomacy. Also clear is that the North Korean delegate did not participate at all in high-level negotia- tions. 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, in adding the same breath that they were willing to negotiate about its dismantling. Hardly so, 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, a non-solution, suspiciously similar to the exact nature of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions had led to a con- frontation with the US which was only expelled the voice it has is distorted. In the image of an erratic North Korea, Washington’s motives have become far more complex than between ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ in the Defence and State Department, the US administration speaks with a split tongue. Where at one moment US Secretary of State Colin Powell might call for a return to the letter of the Agreed Framework, on the next, Washington is suddenly shifting towards a more accommodat- ing policy, suggesting that this is any more than window dressing. The US participates in the May 2003 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 accommodationist economic and diplomatic approach. However, by maintaining this policy con- fusion, the American government can rest assured that the North will stick to its provocative posturing. Unable to meet the American administration, the North has no intention to let its guard down. Iraq was a clear reminder that concessions and cooperation with this administration can be counterproductive.

**Cold war redux**

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Notes

1 See the mission statement of the AsCK, on: www.asck.org/statement.html
4 North Korea’s voice is seldom heard (undistorted). In Berlin, a very balanced image of an immovable, monolithic North Korea was dispelled following the intervention of former American President Jimmy Carter. The agreement that was eventually brokered offered the North two new proliferation-proof 1,000 MW-light water reactors in return for the internationally supervised dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear complex. The Republic was opposed to the Amended Korean Congress appropriation 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 Agreement into irretrievable 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, followed the Agreed Framework 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 on the Peninsula could have been contained. The secret uranium enrichment programme that started this renewed nuclear crisis over North Korea was a product that took 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. American mismanagement of this crisis, proved by 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 North and South, the Berlin symposium and included (in German transla- tion) in the (unpublished) symposium materials.

1 At the Berlin Symposium, Bruce Cumings spoke on ‘North Korea, the Sequel’, addressing the Washingtonrangle over some form of North Korea policy in a forthcoming book, North Korea: The Hermit Kingdom, New York and London: The New Press (2003), he paints a tantalizing portrait of North Korea.