

Viewpoint: Time to tell North Korea: It's now or never

As one of the major achievements from extended diplomatic efforts by Washington to advance the stalled six-party Beijing talks on Pyongyang's nuclear programs, North Korea has handed over more than 18,000 pages of data on its plutonium production to visiting Sung Kim, director of U.S. State Department's Korea Office.

Clarification on North Korea's plutonium-producing activities has long been a key precondition for progress in dismantling Pyongyang's nuclear facilities. Pyongyang's compliance to disclose an inventory of its nuclear activities on May 8 helps set the stage for the likely resumption of six-party talks later this month.

North Korean nuclear obsession has remained a constant for more than half a century. In fact, recently de-classified Soviet documents revealed that North Korea was to some extent involved in nuclear politics as early as 1948.

The Kim clan — late Great Leader Kim Il Sung and his son, Dear Leader Kim Jong Il — has always considered the possession of nuclear weapons as a means of countering what it perceives as a military threat from the U.S. and thus ensuring the continued existence of the Kim dynasty. "A people without a reliable war deterrent," declared the North Korean foreign ministry last year, "are bound to meet a tragic death and the sovereignty of their country is bound to be wantonly infringed upon. This is a bitter lesson taught by the bloodshed resulting from the law of the jungle in different parts of the world."

So why is Pyongyang now ready to give up its 60-year nuclear obsession and willing to collaborate?

The Pyongyang regime is under increasing pressure, both domestically and internationally, to talk and make a deal with the United States.

Domestically, the Kim clan's attempts to fill their empty state coffers through missile technology sales and *juche* (self-reliance) ideal have only led to countrywide famine and created within the country an environment of desperation. This year, the country is suffering from its worst food shortage in 10 years. And if the price of food continues to rise, millions of North Koreans will be exposed to the risk of death by starvation.

What is perhaps more significant is the situation inside North Korea has begun to show signs of change. Economically, as Kim Young Il, a North Korean defector and now president of the People for Successful Korean Reunification, told his audience in a recent panel discussion held by the Peterson Institute in Washington, "The economic system in DPRK has transformed to a

capitalist one, not as result of any change mandated by Kim Jong Il, but the people changed the system for their survival.”

Politically, “one of the most tremendous changes, which may be difficult to comprehend by outsiders,” testified Kim Seung Min, President of Free North Korea Radio and also a North Korean defector, “is the ability to criticize Kim Jong Il among friends and family members, which was virtually unheard of 10 years ago, even between husbands and wives.”

Internationally, despite Pyongyang’s failure to meet the initial Dec. 31, 2007, deadline to disclose its nuclear inventory and proliferation, all parties concerned, including China, South Korea, Russia, and Japan, remain committed to deny Pyongyang’s membership in the nuclear club and an eventual denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This concerted effort has made Pyongyang realize its increasing isolation and forced it to comply with the February 2007 Beijing agreement, which requires the Communist state to close down its main nuclear reactor and begin dismantling its atomic-weapons program.

Perhaps the most important reason that has brought North Korea’s compliance is the Bush administration’s new North Korean policy of diplomatic engagement and direct talk with Pyongyang. As Adam Castillo of Diplomatic Courier noticed, “The United States, initially having to be coaxed into the talks amidst Chinese pressure has remained surprisingly resolute in its diplomatic commitments. Assistant Secretary of State and top nuclear negotiator Christopher Hill remained guardedly optimistic about the negotiations and expected that North Korea would finally divulge all of its weapons information in return for the swift removal of North Korea from the list of states that sponsor terrorism and the delivery of much needed energy and humanitarian aid.”

The United States and international community together have made it clear to Pyongyang that a nuclear capable North Korea is out of the question and its only alternative is to fully comply. Before President Bush leaves the White House, Washington should mount more pressure on Pyongyang to abandon all nuclear programs permanently and verifiably, or risk its best chance at a deal with the United States.

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