



North Korea's "Kill Strategy" toward the U.S. June 23 Proposal: How it Happened and Why it is Important by Larry A. Niksch

On June 23, 2004, the Bush Administration issued a proposal at the six party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue: the first U.S. proposal since the talks began 13 months earlier. The proposal called for a three month freeze of all North Korean nuclear programs, North Korean agreement to verifiable measures to dismantle these programs, and the provision to North Korea of a security guarantee from the United States and fuel oil from South Korea and Japan. The United States also would negotiate with North Korea on other benefits to be extended when the dismantlement process was a fait accompli.

The U.S. proposal seemed to create a more positive atmosphere in the June talks, compared to prior meetings. North Korea's initial reaction was moderate. North Korean officials found fault with several aspects of the proposal, but they also stated that it contained positive elements. One month later, however, the atmosphere changed. North Korea's Foreign Ministry denounced the proposal as a "sham proposal" in a statement of July 24. This signaled the start of a propaganda assault on the U.S. proposal by North Korea media organs. By mid-August, North Korea was rejecting proposals to hold a new round of six party talks in September.

Why had the outlook deteriorated so rapidly in so short a time? What is the longer term outlook if the June 23 U.S. proposal expires as an active diplomatic measure before the U.S. presidential election in November 2004?

North Korea's move to full rejection took one month. One can conjecture that, during that month, there was considerable discussion and possibly debate within the leadership. One can also conjecture with more certainty that North Korea examined closely the reactions of the other six party talks participants. These governments had pressured the Bush administration to issue a comprehensive proposal; China, Russia, and South Korea had criticized Washington over many months for the absence of a U.S. proposal. Nevertheless, from June 23 to July 24 and afterwards, the North Koreans viewed an absence of positive statements or endorsements of the U.S. proposal from these governments. Russia openly criticized the proposal. Other governments – even Japan – were silent about it, despite numerous statements from them concerning the six party talks. There was little indication of more positive responses in private; but even if so, public statements counted for more in demonstrating firmness of position, exerting greater influence on other governments and elite opinion, and sending a stronger message to North Korea.

The other governments continued to refrain from criticizing or challenging North Korea's "reward for freeze" proposal. Russia openly praised it. Thus, the North Korean

Foreign Ministry stated confidently on July 24 that the freeze proposal "received the widespread support and sympathy not only at the six party talks but also from the world's various countries."

True, the Bush Administration was inert in promoting its proposal and challenging Pyongyang's proposal. Even after June 23, it continued to demonstrate tone deafness to the importance of propaganda in diplomatic strategy toward North Korea. It also confused its message by talking more about its "Libya formula" than the June 23 proposal.

Nevertheless, it was the non-response of the other governments to the U.S. proposal that has placed the six party talks in crisis. North Korea sees an opportunity to kill the June 23 proposal prior to the U.S. presidential election. Its threat to boycott the September talks is calculated to influence other governments not to endorse the U.S. proposal and treat positively its "reward for freeze" proposal. The positions of China, Russia, and South Korea raise the fundamental question of whether they want a settlement that ends North Korea's nuclear programs, or, instead, would prefer a revision of the 1994 Agreed Framework based on a limited freeze of North Korea's plutonium program.

North Korea appears to calculate that the diplomatic death of the June 23 proposal would weaken both a second Bush administration or a Kerry administration. The death of the proposal would isolate the Bush Administration further diplomatically, making it more difficult to secure support from other governments for coercive measures against Pyongyang. This is an especially high risk calculation because a second Bush Administration might react by adopting coercive measures, as indicated by a National Security Council memorandum of June 2004.

North Korea also likely calculates that the death of the U.S. proposal would force a Kerry administration to formulate a diplomatic policy from "ground zero." That would take months, giving North Korea an open playing field to continue to promote and propagandize its "reward for freeze" proposal and gain additional support for it. A Kerry administration thus would enter talks in a weak position, facing heavy pressure to negotiate a revised Agreed Framework that would defer dismantlement and omit from a freeze North Korea's uranium enrichment program and possibly even nuclear fuel and weapons-grade plutonium.

North Korea's diplomatic successes since August 2003 give it confidence that its "kill strategy" will succeed. The holding of a new six party meeting prior to the U.S. election is less important than whether the Bush administration and the other six party governments will promote the basic principles of the June 23 proposal sufficiently to keep it alive as a key element of six party diplomacy. If the cost of persuading North Korea to attend is the continued neutrality of the other governments toward the U.S. and North Korean proposals, a

September meeting only will add to the negative situation. If the six party governments fail to revive the June 23 proposal, the North Korean nuclear issue will enter into an even more uncertain stage with diminishing prospects of a genuine denuclearization settlement and potentially greater dangers.

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