

North Korean no-war pact not on the cards

Behind all the diplomatic, and some not so diplomatic, rhetoric in the confrontation between the United States and North Korea over Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions are three basic reasons why US President George W. Bush will not offer the North Koreans the nonaggression pact they demand.

One is constitutional: The president's chances of rounding up the two-thirds majority -- or 67 votes -- in the Senate, as required by the Constitution to approve a treaty, are close to zero. Too many senators from right to left would vote against it for various reasons.

The second is political: The president does not want to stir up another controversial issue in the campaign for the presidential election in 2004 -- not when he has Iraq, the global war on terror, medical insurance, unemployment and the budget deficit staring him in the face.

And the third is North Korean diplomatic behaviour: They are up to their capricious antics again, first by scoffing at Bush's proposal for a multinational pledge that North Korea would not be attacked, then by saying they were ready to consider it. In the last days they were back to asserting that the offer was "nothing but a sleight of hand" from one not qualified to be president.

Add to that North Korea's long and well-documented record of breaking international agreements, and the reasons for the widespread

skepticism in the administration and Congress about entering into accords with Pyongyang become evident.

The Bush administration has suggested for at least 10 months that it could give North Korea written promises that the US would not attack. Bush capped those assurances during his recent trip to Asia, telling reporters: "A

treaty is not going to happen, but there are other ways to effect, on paper, what I have said publicly -- we have no intention of invading."

Bush's plan is to persuade North Korea's immediate neighbours -- China, Japan, South Korea and Russia -- to sign the pledge. China has taken the helm in guiding what are known as the six-party talks, which are aimed at persuading North Korea to back away from its nuclear ambitions, and seems eager to see North Korea abandon its nuclear plans.

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The acceptance of Japan and South Korea would be essential to a nonaggression pledge with North Korea because each has a security treaty with the US Washington will insist that an agreement with North Korea must not dilute its commitment to help defend Japan and South

more difficult than imagined, even now, as the North Koreans have threatened several times in the last two weeks, albeit obliquely, to explode a nuclear device.

"When the appropriate times comes," said the official Korean Central News Agency, "the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) will take a measure to open its nuclear deterrent to the public as a physical force and then there will be no need to have any more argument."

In the US Senate, Bush's rival for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, has long been among the most outspoken critics of North Korea and US policy toward that country, particularly that of former President Bill Clinton, a Democrat. McCain would almost certainly cast a jaundiced eye on a proposed nonaggression treaty with

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In return, the North Koreans would give up plans to acquire a nuclear arsenal in a way that could be verified. That will most likely be

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North Korea. Among the moderates, Sen. Richard Lugar, an Indiana Republican and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, has applauded Bush's insistence on multinational diplomacy toward North Korea while leaving the door open for bilateral talks with the North Koreans. Lugar has shown no enthusiasm for a nonaggression treaty.

On the Democratic side, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, a contender for his party's presidential nomination next year, has advocated persuading North Korea to freeze its nuclear program in return for "some commitment from the US that North Korea's security will not be jeopardised." At the same time, he says, "we must make clear that we retain all options, including the military option, if North Korea breaks the freeze."

Politicians of all stripes watch the polls, obviously, and they register little enthusiasm for jousting the North Koreans with a treaty. One poll reported that 61 per cent of Americans regarded North Korea as a long-term threat while another survey claimed that 79 per cent do so. Still another found that 59 per cent of Americans thought North Korea was a problem while 22 per cent said the threat posed by the country constituted a crisis.

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