

# North Korea: the next stop?

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Asia

THE six-party talks, expected to begin on August 26 in Beijing, will determine whether the crisis created by North Korea's nuclear ambitions is amenable to a peaceful solution. The multilateral negotiations will involve North Korea, United States, China, Russia, South Korea and Japan.

Washington appears to have opted for a dual-track strategy involving dialogue and diplomacy as well as punitive measures to apply pressure on Pyongyang. While the Bush administration is united to end North Korea's nuclear programme, it is deeply divided over how to achieve that aim. The hardliners in Washington insist on the need for "regime change", others are prepared to let Kim Jong-Il stay in power provided the nuclear programme is fully dismantled and the process is verified by intrusive nuclear inspections across North Korea.

A former CIA director and an ex-defence secretary have added muscle to a lobbying campaign by US hawks urging a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities. Details of a war strategy for invading North Korea and toppling its regime within 30 to 60 days have been provided in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, co-written by former CIA director James Woosley and a retired US air force Lt-general Thomas McInerney.

Mr Woosley, who is Pentagon's adviser and a close ally of defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld is thought to reflect Pentagon's thinking. He was an early proponent of an invasion of Iraq and the fact that he has now turned his attention to North Korea is not without significance.

Woosley's war plan includes 4,000 daily air strikes against North Korean targets, the deployment of cruise missiles and stealth aircraft to destroy the Yong Byon nuclear plant and other nuclear facilities, the stationing of US marine forces off the coast of North Korea to threaten a land attack on Pyongyang, the deployment of two additional US army divisions to bolster South Korean troops in a land offensive against North Korea, and the call-up of national guards and reserve units to replace US combat forces that are currently bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to Mr Woosley and Lt-general McInerney, base infrastructure available in the region and accessibility of North Korea from the sea should make it possible to generate around 4,000 sorties a day compared to 800 a day in the recent Iraq war.

Some analysts predict that North Korea could test a nuclear warhead by the end of this year. Woosley and McInerney have warned that a war could soon become necessary to prevent North Korea from selling weapon-grade plutonium to "rogue" states and terrorist organizations. "The world has weeks to months at most, to deal with this issue, not months to years," Mr. Woosley and Lt. General McInerney wrote.

Similar warning have been issued by William Perry, the former US defence secretary, who said North Korea and the United States were drifting towards war — perhaps as early as this year. It is difficult to say to what extent is this merely geopolitical games-

manship. The blunt talk from Washington is occurring at a time when serious diplomatic efforts are being made to find a peaceful solution to the impasse.

Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo and Moscow want to prevent a nuclear-armed North Korea triggering an Asian arms race which will destabilize the region. An air attack on North Korean facilities is likely to provoke a full-scale war. Also, US forces are already stretched thin by the occupation of Iraq, the US budget deficit is growing (projected at 5 per cent of the GDP for 2003) and President Bush's campaign would not be helped by an East Asian war, particularly so soon after the recent Iraq war. President Bush has repeatedly made it clear that he favours a peaceful

may persuade North Korea to agree to nuclear inspections conducted by China and Russia, in close collaboration with the International Atomic Agency, to verify the complete dismantling of North Korea's plutonium and uranium-based weapons programme.

However, a likely obstacle to China's peace efforts could be the US negotiators scepticism about any promises made by North Korea, given Pyongyang's track record particularly the breaking of the 1994 pact it signed with the Clinton administration.

Even Beijing which once described its relationship with Pyongyang as being as close as "lips and teeth" appears to be growing weary of its inscrutable neighbour. China fears that

an economic collapse next door will lead to millions of North Koreans crossing into China and King Jong-Il's nuclear programme will oblige South Korea and Japan to follow suit.

Many analysts believe that Mr. Kim will be prepared to trade off his nuclear programme for economic assistance and a non-aggression pact with the US. After all, the basic cause of this current nuclear crisis is that Mr. Kim needs economic assistance to avoid economic collapse while Washington requires strict verification of North Korea's nuclear rollback.

It is also clear that left to these two parties, (like India-Pakistan's unending feud over Kashmir) the resolution of the current crisis will remain as remote as ever. That is why China's role becomes pivotal for a peaceful settlement.

The roadmap towards a solution, according to media reports, being sketched out by the six governments that will participate in the talks is likely to be along the following lines: North Korea will be offered a short term security guarantee in return for an immediate freeze of its nuclear programme. A permanent dismantling of the programme would then be negotiated, with Pyongyang allowing unlimited inspections and the US and its partners offering normal relations and economic aid.

The US has repeatedly insisted that North Korea must permanently dismantle its nuclear programme before it is eligible for any rewards. Since the cost of the war would be very high, the US may accept a deal involving simultaneous and phased concessions from both sides.

Any settlement with Pyongyang will be resisted by those in Washington who think that a regime change is as legitimate an objective in North Korea as it was in Iraq. The North Korean secretive leaders, for their part, worry that the US will trick them into giving up nuclear weapons and then try to topple the regime anyway. So the obstacles in ending the nuclear crisis through talks are as formidable as the bunkers on either side of the demilitarized zone.

The forthcoming six-party talks in Beijing should help clarify matters. With the involvement of China and Russia in these talks, prospects for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis have vastly improved. A multilateral pact appears significantly more attainable today than just a few months ago. The outcome of the Beijing talks will be watched with keen interest as alternative to a peaceful settlement is frightening indeed.

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resolution of the crisis but at the same time he has pointedly refused to rule out a military attack.

Peace and stability on the Korean peninsula are crucial to South Korea, China and Japan which together account for one-quarter of the world's population. South Korea, the world's eleventh biggest economy is particularly vulnerable. All the 47 million of its people live within the range of North Korean missiles and its capital Seoul is just 50 kilometres south of the North Korean border and most of the city is within artillery range of the North.

According to Pentagon estimates, one million people, most of them South Koreans, could die in the first month of the war. If North Korea carries out its threat to attack Japan, the human and economic cost could be staggering.

Another South Korean worry is that the cost of rebuilding the North in the event of reunification would cripple the southern economy. A unified Korea under a pro-US South Korean establishment is an anathema to Beijing. It is not the thought of a united Korea but of the US troops on the Yalu River which can cause sleepless nights for the Chinese leadership. The hawks in Washington may be thinking of a regime change in Pyongyang but they have to realize that it would be a lot harder to act unilaterally on the Korean peninsula against the wishes of the countries in the region than it was in the case of Iraq.

China can play a pivotal role in the resolution of the crisis created by North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Beijing has more leverage on Pyongyang than any other country. China provides almost 70 per cent of North Korea's energy and a third of its food. China may assist in resolving the current crisis in the following manner: it may ask the US non-aggression assurance to North Korea, co-sponsored by China; South Korea and Japan may be asked to provide economic aid in the form of development project financing; and China