

WAR STORIES

Bush Bargains Badly

Kim Jong-il outwits W. on nukes.

By Fred Kaplan

This week, after 20 months of doing nothing about North Korea's drive to build nuclear weapons, President Bush finally put a proposal—a set of incentives for disarmament—on the negotiating table. The remarkable thing is, the deal is practically identical to the accord that President Clinton signed with Pyongyang in 1994—an accord that Bush condemned and scuttled from the moment he took over the White House. (For more on this tale, [click here](#) and [here](#).)

It's good that Bush has at last realized that diplomacy is the only way to solve the crisis. But he's come a bit late to this epiphany. North Korea has greatly strengthened its hand in the interim. Two years ago, its 8,000 fuel rods were padlocked under international inspection. Now, they've been reprocessed into bomb-grade plutonium.

Had Bush made the offer back when he first had the chance, Kim Jong-il probably would have taken it. Kim may take it still; his closest allies, the Chinese, are urging him to. But if he behaves the way he usually behaves—the way any cunningly rational leader in his position would behave—he will up the ante, ask for more, and walk away with a shrug if Bush declines. And he knows that there's not much Bush can do about it.

Bush has stunningly mishandled this confrontation. He has allowed North Korea—the most rickety spoke on his “axis of evil,” a dangerous regime by any measure—to reach the crest of becoming a nuclear power. He has dismissed numerous opportunities to nip this disaster in the bud. And now he comes up with an old formula that evades the recent shift in the balance.

In short, by his own careless arrogance, the president of the world's most powerful nation has allowed himself to be outmaneuvered by the very model of a modern tinhorn dictator.

The proposal that Bush let Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly put on the table Tuesday night—a proposal that reportedly originated with South Korea—amounts to the following: North Korea has three months to commit to dismantling its nuclear weapons program. Once it makes this declaration, the United States will provisionally pledge not to invade its territory or topple its regime. At the same time, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia will start sending North Korea an enormous amount of fuel oil each month. A timetable marking subsequent steps, including the dropping of economic sanctions, will culminate with North Korea actually dismantling its nuclear facilities and shipping its plutonium abroad to be destroyed.

The only thing new about this proposal is that it calls for North Korea to receive energy assistance in the form of heavy fuel. Clinton's 1994 accord, formally titled the Agreed Framework, called for the assistance to come in the form of two light-water nuclear reactors, with heavy fuel provided only as an interim measure. Otherwise, the two deals are essentially the same.

Bush, it must be said, was not entirely responsible for the Agreed Framework's collapse. The United States and North Korea both started to renege on it before Bush's inauguration. The accord called on the United States, South Korea, and Japan to deliver the first of two light-water reactors by a target date of 2003, yet the financing went awry almost at once. Within three months of the accord's signing, the United States and North Korea were to lower trade barriers and open consulates in each other's capitals, with the aim of moving “toward full normalization of political and economic relations.” None of those steps was ever taken.

When Bush came to the White House, he aggravated tensions by disavowing the Agreed Framework, criticizing South Korea's new policy of détente with the North, and advocating regime change in Pyongyang. The rupture came in October 2002, when U.S. intelligence discovered that North Korea was secretly enriching uranium—an alternative method of making nuclear bombs. The intelligence also indicated that the covert enrichment had begun during Clinton's presidency.

Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly confronted North Korean diplomats with the evidence. They confessed, and Bush cut off all ties. Some penalty had to be inflicted. But at least enriching uranium takes a very long time compared with reprocessing fuel rods into plutonium. Keeping those 8,000 fuel rods locked up in a pool and guarded by international inspectors, therefore, should have been Bush's prime concern. If those rods were unlocked, North Korea could have a dozen nuclear bombs within a year.

After Bush cut off the ties in the fall of 2002, North Korea reacted by threatening to abrogate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, kick out the international inspectors, unlock the rods, and haul them to a nearby reprocessing facility. Bush called these threats "blackmail" and said that even sitting down to talk about them would constitute "appeasement." The North Koreans went ahead and did what they said they would do. Bush did nothing, diplomatically or militarily.

In January 2003, North Korean emissaries, perhaps realizing that they'd gone too far, reached out to various diplomats and middlemen, saying they would renew their pledge to the non-proliferation treaty, put the rods back, and let the inspectors in, if the United States fulfilled its own commitments under the Agreed Framework. Bush still refused to talk.

Kim Jong-il's actions were irresponsible and ill-calculated, but much evidence indicates he meant them as a bargaining chip. (In 1993, his father, Kim Il-Sung, had made similar moves, triggering the crisis that was resolved with the Agreed Framework.) Still, if Bush was unwilling to bargain, Kim Jong-il would simply go ahead with his nuclear project, gaining leverage in the process—to say nothing of hard currency, selling the stuff on the global black market.

For the next year-and-a-half, a bureaucratic battle raged inside the Bush administration. Secretary of State Colin Powell urged a diplomatic approach. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney urged economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military pressure, which they felt would topple Kim's regime.

Last summer, Bush gave in to the Powell faction, letting his diplomats talk directly with North Korea's diplomats. He still barred them, however, from offering any proposals or trades.

And so, the reprocessing continued and North Korea came closer to building bombs.

This week, finally, Bush caved further to Powell, and authorized real negotiations. One can imagine a few reasons for this shift.

First, he might have realized that Kim Jong-il's regime can survive, no matter how hungry his people might be.

Second, the U.S. negotiating partners—China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia—have started to cut their own separate deals with North Korea. If Bush let this freelancing go on much longer, the United States would soon have lost nearly all its influence in the region.

Third, if he ever thought there might be a military option for settling the North Korean nuclear crisis, the bog of Iraq must serve as a powerful dissuader.

Fourth, Bush needs a diplomatic victory *somewhere* to bolster his chances for reelection. Peace and democracy in Iraq seem a less than likely prospect. Stopping North Korea from getting the bomb wouldn't be a bad second choice.

The problem is that Kim Jong-il no doubt knows that Bush is in a spot. If a deal is to be made, he will try to wring as much as he can—more than he might have managed

while the fuel rods were still locked up and the inspectors in place. Nukes are the only chips he's got. He will cash them in at inflated prices—or stack them high with impunity.

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