

Bush initiative could mean nuclear-free Korea

Kim's elusive bomb

By Peter Hayes in Pyongyang

North Korea's positive response to US President George Bush's nuclear disarmament announcement on 27 September suggests that the two Koreas may be approaching a point where serious talks could start on establishing a nuclear-free zone on the divided peninsula. But talks on the nuclear issue, and particularly on the difficult problem of mutual inspection, would be a race against time. Protracted delay will make it more difficult to terminate whatever nuclear weapons programme may be under way in the North — an activity that could produce a nuclear device within two years.

Another danger is that failure to reach accommodation with the South, on both military and economic issues, could force Pyongyang to take the road to Rangoon rather than to Seoul. Retreat into Burma-type isolation would almost certainly not help solve the North's economic problems. But such a course could mean that the South could then face a nuclear-capable North during a possibly turbulent transition from President Kim Il Sung's leadership.

Hints that the Bush initiative might make possible a breakthrough on the nuclear issue were dropped by senior North Korean officials and army officers during a visit by this writer to Pyongyang in mid-October. "We welcomed it and asked for it to be realised early in the Korean Peninsula," said Kim Yong Sun, reportedly very powerful within the political hierarchy. He noted that North Korea had never before welcomed a US initiative.

Diplomatic and official sources in Seoul confirm that a joint North-South declaration on the nuclear issue is under active consideration in Seoul. But there are problems of credibility on both sides. In particular US and South Korean officials question whether the North is really anxious to talk, or is merely attempting to create a mood which might make South Korea more amenable on other issues — notably

the provision of economic aid.

The North's continuing refusal to sign a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remains the single biggest obstacle to a resolution of the nuclear issue in Korea. The North reacted angrily to the IAEA board of governors' September meeting which castigated Pyongyang for not signing the accord. Pyongyang officials initially concluded that the West wanted to expel North Korea from the IAEA altogether.

On the face of it the Bush statement would seem to have removed some of the ill feeling in Pyongyang about the events in September. "I want it to be clear," said Kim Yong Sun, "that we are ready to receive nuclear inspection, even if it is tomorrow." If the US responds to North Korea's demands for a nuclear-free zone in "one way or another," he stated, North Korea's signature of the safeguards accord would follow "automatically."

South Korean and US officials view such statements as incredible, citing North Korea's negotiating intransigence and shifting attitudes to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty of which it is a signatory. They also believe that US intelligence has shown definitively that the North is developing nuclear weapons at Yongbyon with plutonium from its own reactor, and that it is building a uranium-enrichment plant. Western analysts estimate that the North could construct a crude nuclear device, as opposed to a deliverable nuclear weapon, within a couple of years.

Particular stress is placed by Washington analysts on the North's long-range version of the highly inaccurate Soviet Scud missile. Like the US Lance missile in the South this makes little military sense unless tipped with a warhead of mass destruction.

This writer was not allowed to go to Yongbyon. Nor would North Korean officials offer any specific response to commercial remote sensing satellite photographs and Western interpretations of ac-

tivities at the Yongbyon site. However, senior officials in the government did provide what they claimed was a detailed account of the country's nuclear programme.

Kim Choi Ki, director of the Science and Technology Bureau of the Ministry of Atomic Energy Industry in Pyongyang, said that Yongbyon is being used to develop the technological capabilities needed to operate a single planned 1.76 gigawatt nuclear power plant to be constructed on the east coast of North Korea. He also confirmed that the North is carrying out research on uranium prospecting and processing. As part of this programme the government is building a pilot plant to extract yellow cake from local uranium ore which the North expects to send overseas for fabrication into fuel rods.

A Soviet reactor would require 3% enriched uranium 235. But according to Ki, the North has no plans to build a uranium-enrichment plant. Discussing North Korea's reactor plans Ki only mentioned a research reactor built by the Soviets at Yongbyon and already inspected by the IAEA. He refused to comment on the fact that satellite pictures show a 40-megawatt reactor operating at the site, referring to "false propaganda" about Yongbyon.

Ki also denied adamantly that the North has a plutonium reprocessing plant. Nor, he claimed, does it have any plans to pursue a plutonium-based breeder reactor economy. Pyongyang has decided not to embark on "deep study" of this topic, Ki remarked.

Official denials aside, Pyongyang's historical experience and its strategic imperatives are consistent with the thesis that it may want its own home-grown bomb. North Korean officials have not forgotten the nuclear threats made during the Korean War. In addition, various factors converged in the mid-1970s that could explain a decision to obtain a nuclear option if not the bomb itself.

First, the US raised the volume of its verbal nuclear threats against North Korea at the end of the Vietnam War. Second, South Korea's attempted nuclear-weapons programme came to light in 1975. Third, US mobilisation during an August 1976 incident on the DMZ convinced many North Koreans that the US was prepared to risk war again with North Korea.

A decision by Pyongyang to develop nuclear weapons could also appear to



Kim Yong Sun: inspection.

YONG SUN

make sense in military terms. North Korean officials are aware that the North is already or will shortly be militarily inferior to the South in offensive military capability. Further, North Koreans have concluded that the Soviet nuclear umbrella in Korea has been withdrawn and that China does not offer a reliable substitute.

North Korean officials flatly deny suggestions that the shifting conventional balance in favour of the South might have led the North to start its own bomb programme. But some officials seemed to admit that there might be an element of deliberate ambiguity in the North's nuclear stance. Asked if the North might be developing a posture of increasing capability matched by studied ambiguity as to intention, one official commented: "There is ambiguity in the South too because of the NCND policy" (the US policy of neither confirming nor denying that nuclear weapons are stored at any given location).

Pyongyang's strategic situation and its *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology are both consistent with attempts to increase its nuclear capability while assiduously maintaining ambiguity as to its ultimate intentions. This ambiguity may be discarded when the South offers a political and economic deal that provides more security than the nuclear option. But each of the three major parties to the dispute — North and South Korea and the US — have contradictory interests in a nuclear-free zone.

North Korea's conditions for signing the IAEA safeguards accord include withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from the South within one year and the right to inspect bases, warships and aircraft in South Korea. These conditions are seen in Pyongyang as being essential to remove current uncertainties about the US position. It is known in the West, for example, that there are no nuclear mines left in South Korea. But the North Korean military still believes that the mines are there.

The North's political flexibility is likely to be limited by the military's insistence that they must be confident that all nuclear weapons are removed from the South. But this leaves room for movement on other conditions such as those involving transit, the linkage of nuclear withdrawal with a reduction of the US troop presence or other issues such as the pace of bargaining on national reunification.

Political officials indicated that Pyongyang may be ready to horse-trade some of its demands. Indeed, one called the North's inspection demands "theoretical." "In practice," he said, "we



Kim Il Sung: transition.

DIPLOMACY

Early signs

By Shim Jae Hoon in Seoul

Impoverished North Korea, increasingly left to its own devices by its allies, China and the Soviet Union, is apparently rethinking its hardline posture towards South Korea. This shift was evident in Pyongyang when South Korean Prime Minister Chung Won Shik and his Northern counterpart held a fourth round of talks aimed at replacing confrontation with reconciliation.

Under a joint statement signed by the two premiers on 24 October, South and North Korea have agreed to negotiate a single comprehensive accord outlining details on ending the state of confrontation and promoting peaceful exchanges. These details will be fleshed out at further, lower-level talks at Panmunjom. Depending on progress at these talks, the proposed agreement could come up for signing at the next premier-level meeting in Seoul in mid-December.

At Pyongyang on 23 October, the atmosphere at the conference tensed briefly when North Korean Premier

need to have talks with the US on such matters."

Other North Korean officials consistently said that they were willing to negotiate on all their specific demands. They admit, for example, that they cannot link the withdrawal of US conventional forces to that of nuclear weapons. "We understand that the US wants to play a deterrent role and watch over the implementation of disarmament in the North and the South," said one official.

In spite of this apparent flexibility the obstacles to an agreement look formidable. In order to break the current deadlock the North would have to modify or drop its demand to inspect transiting warplanes or ships. In the aftermath of the Bush statement, this demand is not politically feasible. Nor is it technologically practical in the case of warships.

For domestic political reasons, the most difficult

Yon Hyong Muk demanded the removal of tactical nuclear weapons under US control in the South. South Korean delegate Kim Jong Whie promptly demanded that Pyongyang should first accept international inspection of its nuclear development facility in Yongbyon.

Even this inconclusive blow for blow was viewed optimistically. Neither side had hitherto acknowledged the nuclear issue, but now, prompted by President George Bush's 27 September nuclear arms cuts proposal, the two sides have at least begun talking about it.

In other areas, the North appeared to be more forthcoming than usual, probably because of worsening economic conditions at home, China's inability to help and Moscow's preoccupation with domestic economic and political problems.

North Korean officials indicated that they might expand trade with Seoul, now conducted irregularly through direct or indirect channels. Kim Jong U, deputy external trade minister in Pyongyang, said economic cooperation would be possible, depending on the progress made at future premier-level talks. His comments appeared to be a measure of the desperation now gripping the North Korean economy. How urgently the North needs the South's help will be seen in Pyongyang's response at the next round of talks. ■

concession for the North will be to permit on-demand, on-site inspections of activities not subject to IAEA nuclear fuel cycle safeguards. For their part the US and South Korea will have to agree to on-site, on-demand inspections in the South. The US has already accepted this procedure in the context of the agreement on the reduction of intermediate-range nuclear forces, but the South has still to come to grips with the issue.

The merit of an agreement on mutual inspection is that stringent inspection arrangements needed for a nuclear-free zone could also serve to support conventional arms reductions in Korea, including dual capable delivery systems such as ballistic missiles. Eventually the US and South Korea seem likely to recognise this though it will certainly take time.

A vital aspect of the nuclear inspection issue is that it is unlikely to be resolved without progress in other areas. In order to extract concessions from the North, the South must signal that it will provide the economic support at the level and pace needed for the North to revive its economy without radical social and political changes. ■