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The New York Times

U.S. Said to Weigh a New Approach on North Korea

[David e. Sanger](#). [New York Times](#). (Late Edition (East Coast)). **New York**, N.Y.: [May 18, 2006](#). pg. A.1

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Subjects: [Peace negotiations](#), [Treaties](#), [Nuclear weapons](#), [Arms control & disarmament](#), [International relations-US -- North Korea](#)

Locations: [North Korea](#)

Author(s): [David e. Sanger](#)

Document types: News

Dateline: *WASHINGTON, May 17*

Section: A

Publication title: [New York Times](#). (Late Edition (East Coast)). **New York**, N.Y.: [May 18, 2006](#). pg. A.1

Source type: Newspaper

ISSN/ISBN: 03624331

ProQuest document ID: 1038311291

Text Word Count 1299

Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1038311291&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=15482&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Abstract (Document Summary)

In his first term, Mr. [Bush] said repeatedly that he would never "tolerate" a nuclear **North Korea**. Now he rarely discusses the country's suspected weapons. Instead, he has met in the Oval Office with escapees from the country and used the events to discuss **North Korea's** prison camps and the suffering of its people.

A classified National Intelligence Estimate **on North Korea**, which was circulated among senior officials earlier this year, concluded that the **North** had probably fabricated the fuel for more than a half-dozen nuclear weapons since the beginning of Mr. Bush's administration and was continuing to produce roughly a bomb's worth of **new** plutonium each year. But in a show of caution after the discovery of intelligence flaws in Iraq, the assessment left unclear whether **North Korea** had actually turned that fuel into weapons.

A National Security Council spokesman declined to comment **on** any internal deliberations **on North Korea** policy and referred all questions to the State Department, which has handled the negotiations with the **North**. The State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, declined to discuss the recommendations made to Mr. Bush and said, "The most important decision is with **North Korea** -- and that is the strategic decision to give up their nuclear weapons program."

Full Text (1299 words)

Copyright New York Times Company May 18, 2006

President Bush's top advisers have recommended a broad new approach to dealing with North Korea that would include beginning negotiations on a peace treaty, even while efforts to dismantle the country's nuclear program are still under way, senior administration officials and Asian diplomats say.

Aides say Mr. Bush is very likely to approve the new approach, which has been hotly debated among different factions within the administration. But he will not do so unless North Korea returns to multinational negotiations over its nuclear program. The talks have been stalled since September.

North Koreans have long demanded a peace treaty, which would replace the 1953 armistice ending the Korean War.

For several years after he first took office, Mr. Bush vowed not to end North Korea's economic and diplomatic isolation until it entirely dismantled its nuclear program. That stance later softened, and the administration said some benefits to North Korea could begin to flow as significant dismantlement took place. Now, if the president allows talks about a peace treaty to take place on a parallel track with six-nation talks on disarmament, it will signal another major change of tactics.

The decision to consider a change may have been influenced in part by growing concerns about Iran's nuclear program. One senior Asian official who has been briefed on the administration's discussions about what to do next said, "There is a sense that they can't leave Korea out there as a model for what the Iranians hope to become -- a nuclear state that can say no to outside pressure."

But it is far from clear that North Korea would engage in any new discussions, especially if they included talk of political change, human rights, terrorism and an opening of the country, topics that the Bush administration has insisted would have to be part of any comprehensive discussions with North Korea.

With the war in Iraq and the nuclear dispute with Iran as distractions, many top officials have all but given up hope that North Korea's government will either disarm or collapse during Mr. Bush's remaining time in office. Increasingly, they blame two of Mr. Bush's negotiating partners, South Korea and China, which have poured aid into North Korea even while the United States has tried to cut off its major sources of revenue.

In his first term, Mr. Bush said repeatedly that he would never "tolerate" a nuclear North Korea. Now he rarely discusses the country's suspected weapons. Instead, he has met in the Oval Office with escapees from the country and used the events to discuss North Korea's prison camps and the suffering of its people.

Mr. Bush has also been under subtle pressure to change the first-term talk of speeding change of government. "Focusing on regime change as the road to denuclearization confuses the issue," former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger wrote in a lengthy op-ed article that appeared in [The Washington Post](#) on Tuesday. Noting that the negotiations have been conducted by Christopher R. Hill, a seasoned diplomat who played a major role in the Dayton peace accords, which halted the civil war in Bosnia, he said, "Periodic engagement at a higher level is needed."

A classified National Intelligence Estimate on North Korea, which was circulated among senior officials earlier this year, concluded that the North had probably fabricated the fuel for more than a half-dozen nuclear weapons since the beginning of Mr. Bush's administration and was continuing to produce roughly a bomb's worth of new plutonium each year. But in a show of caution after the discovery of intelligence flaws in Iraq, the assessment left unclear whether North Korea had actually turned that fuel into weapons.

With the six-nation negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program appearing to go nowhere, the drive for a broader strategy was propelled by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and one of her top aides, Philip D. Zelikow, who drafted two papers describing the new approach.

Those papers touched off what one senior official called "a blizzard of debate" over the next steps that eventually included Mr. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, who has been widely described by current and former officials as leading the drive in Mr. Bush's first term to make sure the North Korean government received no concessions from the United States until all of its weapons and weapons sites were taken apart. It is unclear where Mr. Cheney stands on the new approach that emerged from the State Department.

Now, said one official who has participated in the recent internal debate, "I think it is fair to say that many in the administration have come to the conclusion that dealing head-on with the nuclear problem is simply too difficult."

The official added, "So the question is whether it would help to try to end the perpetual state of war" that has existed, at least on paper, for 53 years. "It may be another way to get there."

An agreement that was signed in September by North Korea and the five other nations involved in the talks -- the United States, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia -- commits the country to give up its weapons and rejoin the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty "at an early date" but leaves completely unclear what would have to come first: disarmament or a series of steps that would aid North Korea.

It also included a sentence that paves the way for the initiative recommended to Mr. Bush, declaring that "the directly related parties will negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum." But it does not specify what steps North Korea would have to take first.

As described by administration officials, none of whom would speak on the record about deliberations inside the White House, Mr. Bush's aides envision starting negotiations over a formal peace treaty that would include the original signatories of the armistice -- China, North Korea and the United States, which signed on behalf of the United Nations. They would also add South Korea, now the world's 11th-largest economy, which declined to sign the original armistice.

Japan, Korea's colonial ruler in the first half of the 20th century, would be excluded, as would Russia.

A National Security Council spokesman declined to comment on any internal deliberations on North Korea policy and referred all questions to the State Department, which has handled the negotiations with the North. The State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, declined to discuss the recommendations made to Mr. Bush and said, "The most important decision is with North Korea -- and that is the strategic decision to give up their nuclear weapons program."

"They signed a joint statement," he added, "but they have yet to demonstrate that they have made a decision to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs."

In justifying its refusal to return to talks, North Korea has complained bitterly about the financial sanctions imposed by the United States, which have been aimed at closing down the North's banking activities in Macao and elsewhere in Asia. The United States has described those steps as "defensive measures" intended to stop the country from counterfeiting American currency and exporting drugs and missiles.

Even if peace treaty talks started, officials insisted, those sanctions would continue. A month ago, Stephen J. Hadley, the national security adviser, told a small audience of foreign policy experts that the sanctions were "the first thing we have done that has gotten their attention," several participants in the meeting said.

Some intelligence officials say they believe the protests may have arisen in part because they affected a secretive operation in North Korea called Unit 39 that finances the personal activities of Kim Jong Il, the North Korean leader, providing the money he spends for his entertainment and to win the loyalty of others in the leadership.

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Locations: **North Korea**

Author(s): David e. Sanger

Document types: News

Language: English

Publication title: **New York Times**

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