

Will US shift to peace treaty talks with NK?

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American diplomatic experts believe their country has changed its longstanding position about signing a peace treaty with North Korea — despite their government's repeated denials.

The Korean War started in 1950 and ended in 1953 with an armistice, not a peace treaty, so the Korean Peninsula is still technically at war.

Talks for a peace treaty, which would formally end the war, are expected to remain a hot potato, along with North Korea's denuclearization.

For decades, the North Korean regime has called for a peace treaty with the United States, claiming that the treaty would reduce the tensions on the peninsula and end the nuclear arms race, but the U.S. government had given short shrift to the call.

However, an unsuccessful attempt to hold a secret meeting before the North's Jan. 6 nuclear test suggests that the United States is shifting from its hard-line stance.

The talks did not take place because North Korea declined the former's proposal to discuss its atomic weapons program; nevertheless, the failed attempt sparked speculation that the United States is stepping back from its denuclearization precondition for peace treaty talks with the North.

"It looks like the administration realizes that refusing to engage the North is a dead end policy. It still wants to set denuclearization at the center of U.S. policy, but it is showing more flexibility in addressing the North," said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

U.S. Naval War College professor Terence Roehrig echoed Bandow's view.

"The apparent change has come in making denuclearization a precondition. It is no doubt that the U.S. administration also realizes that North Korea will not voluntarily relinquish its nuclear weapons so that holding out denuclearization as a precondition means there will be no dialogue whatsoever," he said.

In response to a Wall Street Journal report last month about the United States' attempt to engage the repressive state, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel told reporters in Seoul on Feb. 26 that the country's original position has not changed.

However, the United States is still showing signs that it could hold talks with North Korea about the peace treaty simultaneous with denuclearization negotiations, which amounts to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's proposal to his U.S. counterpart John Kerry last month.

"We haven't ruled out the possibility that there could sort of be some sort of parallel process here," State Department spokesman John Kirby said at a regular briefing, Thursday.

Leon Sigal, director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York, said the U.S. government is reverting to the stance it agreed to on the Sept. 19, 2005 six-party joint statement that committed the "directly related parties" to "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula," parallel to negotiations on the North's denuclearization and political and economic normalization.

"It recognizes the reality that denuclearization cannot advance very far without a peace process in Korea that addresses North Korea's security concerns," he said.

While negotiating on new international sanctions on North Korea for its recent nuclear test and long-range rocket launch, China proposed holding peace treaty negotiations with North Korea simultaneously with denuclearization talks as a way to defuse the heightened tensions on the peninsula.

Even after the U.N. adoption of the new resolution on Wednesday, the Chinese side continues to raise the issue.

"China does not want a nuclear North Korea anymore than anyone else. It also wants a stable North Korea. A peace treaty would recognize North Korea's right to exist — which the U.S. and South Korea do not currently accept — and remove the need for its nukes," said Robert Kelly, an international relations professor at Pusan National University.

"A peace deal strongly suits Chinese interests here, and I expect they will emphasize it."

In addition, given that China cooperated with the U.S. push for the toughest resolution thus far, China is expected to continue to call for a peace treaty.

"The U.S. shift in its stance is also meeting China's condition for supporting U.N. Security Council sanctions," Sigal said.

Seoul's exclusion from talks

Meanwhile, South Korea may not have any say in the proposed peace treaty talks. While Washington and Beijing are leaning toward peace treaty talks, Seoul still calls for Pyongyang's denuclearization before such talks. As such, some experts speculate it will be excluded from

possible discussions.

"I think that President Park Geun-hye has rendered South Korea irrelevant to talks to North Korea for the foreseeable future due to her rupture with past policy and the Gaeseong decision, leaving the issue to the big powers to resolve," said Peter Hayes, the executive director of the U.S.-based Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability.

Three days after the North's rocket launch on Feb. 7, the government shuttered the Gaeseong Industrial Complex, the last remaining symbol of inter-Korean reconciliation, to cut off the flow of money to the country's development of weapons of mass destruction.

"This is the nature of international politics. Seoul has a history of engaging with North Korea behind the back of America, so it shouldn't be that surprising that the U.S. would do the same," said Van Jackson, a professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.

"It's just how business is done. When it's possible to simultaneously consult with allies, the U.S. and South Korea will do so, and when it's not, they won't."

However, the other experts said South Korea does not have anything to worry about.

"There is no way Washington will do that. Pyongyang has acknowledged that many times in the past. A peace process makes no sense without including all the parties with armed forces in Korea," Sigal said.

"I doubt the U.S. administration would proceed with detailed talks over a peace treaty without insisting on the inclusion of Seoul," Bandow also said.

Kelly advised the South Korean government to be accountable for and take initiative with any deals made with the North.

"It is South Korea, not the U.S., that is ultimately responsible for fixing North Korea, and if a deal is made without South Korea, the South Korean public might not see it as legitimate and hold to it. That said, I do think South Korea could do more," he said.

"Greater South Korean defense outlays, and greater public seriousness and sustained attention regarding North Korea, would put South Korea in the driver's seat of the North Korea debate. Ultimately North Korea is South Korea's problem first, not America's or China's."

NK's motivation for offering peace treaty talks

Experts said North Korea's repeated calls for peace treaty talks with the United States seek both political and security interests.

"North Korea's most important goal is regime survival. A peace treaty with the United States helps to ensure that goal but would also be a huge political victory for Kim Jong-un," Roehrig said.

Jackson also said, "Thus, concluding a peace treaty would be a significant accomplishment both politically, and for its security."

"The real value to North Korea is fracturing alliance solidarity while implicitly gaining de facto recognition of its nuclear weapons program."