

Sections

- News
- Letters
- Pulse
- Sports
- Stripes Accent
- Stripes Travel
- Sunday magazine

Information

- About us /
Contacts
- Archive highlights
- Archive Photo of
the Day
- Classified ads
- Library research
- Links
- Print Shop
- Stripes Lite

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Current Articles
Archives

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Experts: N. Korea has long road ahead

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

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YONGSAN GARRISON, South Korea — North Korea's offer this week to suspend its nuclear weapons program in exchange for U.S. incentives appears to be the most positive sign the reclusive country has put forth in years, analysts say.

But academics differ on whether the moves are genuine or if the closed country is merely fishing for a good deal while the United States focuses on Iraq.

"Any negotiations are going to be very difficult," said David Garretson, a lecturer at the University of Maryland's Asian Division. "They are going to be tough as nails."

North Korea has demanded it be pulled off a U.S. list of nations sponsoring terrorism; it also wants the United States to sign a nonaggression pact prior to nuclear program discussions. The United States has demanded an end to the North Korea's nuclear program and a thorough verification program before economic and security guarantees can be offered.

So who makes the first move?

"If you read the real message behind the lines, both sides want the other side to give up first," said Kim Tae-hyo, a professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security under the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The United States wants to deal with the North Korean nuke issue multilaterally, but August talks in Beijing with Japan, Russia, the two Koreas, and China flopped and no further meetings are scheduled.

An unofficial delegation of five Americans arrived Tuesday in North Korea for a five-day visit aimed at continuing dialogue. The group includes a former Los

Alamos National Laboratory director, two congressional aides, a former State Department envoy to North Korea and a Stanford University professor.

The delegation may be able to gauge North Korea's attitudes and feelings toward new six-party talks, Kim said.

Wednesday, the official North Korean news agency encouraged the United States to respond to its offer, blaming it for the current crisis.

"Had the Bush administration abandoned its hostile policy towards the DPRK and not singled out it as part of an 'axis of evil,' a target of its preemptive nuclear attack, the nuclear issue would have not reached such a serious phase," the agency wrote.

While North Korea appears to step forward, their sincerity is questionable, Kim said. Any promise to cease weapons development and nuclear research would have to be verified through inspections, and it's unknown to what extent North Korea would reveal their capacities and their facilities, Kim said.

North Korea likely still wants to be part of the "nuclear club," said Mark Monahan, a professor of Asian studies at the University of Maryland. "I don't think they want to change that. I don't think they have given up that goal."

While the CIA estimates North Korea may have produced a handful of nuclear weapons and has depleted uranium stores that could produce dozens more, information is scarce because of the country's isolation. Satellite photographs show an active facility at Yongbyon running since the 1960s, but the aerial shots reveal little, Monahan said.

"We have a paucity of information," Monahan said.

U.S. Forces Korea commander Gen. Leon J. LaPorte told USA Today last month that "Intelligence is problematic for us. It's a very closed society. Things we might know about another country, we don't know about North Korea."

Nonetheless, the country's nuclear bluster is "enough to make anyone nervous," Garretson said.

North Korea broke a 1994 deal that would have given it two light-water nuclear reactors in exchange for stopping its nuclear program. The country allegedly told a U.S. diplomat in October 2002 that it had an active nuclear weapons program, in violation of the agreement.

The Bush administration has used a carrot-and-stick policy against North Korea,

but the White House and Defense Department will likely remain skeptical of any sudden moves, Monahan said. The war against Iraq, the opening of Libya's weapons programs and Iran's move toward international inspections may have caused an "overspill" that's influencing North Korea, Garretson said.

"I do think overall the administration would like to show it is engaged with North Korea," Garretson said. "On the other side, the North Koreans are sensing what they can get."

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