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Bush policies fail to contain North Korea: Author

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South Korea has defended a deal that put a North Korean nuclear disarmament agreement back on track after Japan said Seoul and Washington had conceded too much.

North Korea has resumed work to disable its plutonium-producing plants and agreed to inspections of its sites, after Washington dropped North Korea from a list of states accused of sponsoring terrorism. South Korea says the deal will enable North Korea to join the international community.

Presenter: Sen Lam

Speaker: Mike Chinoy former CNN North Asia correspondent, now a senior fellow on Asia at the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles

CHINOY: Until the United States and North Korea reached the deal announced a few days back under which the Americans took North Korea off their list of state sponsors of terrorism and the North Koreans accepted arrangements for verifying the declaration they'd submitted on their nuclear program you had a very dangerous dynamic under way. The North felt that the US had reneged on a commitment to take it off the terrorism list and so they had begun to restart operations at their Yongbyon nuclear complex. If that dynamic had not been reversed there was a real danger of the North going forward in about the time a new American president took office the nuclear program would be up and running again with the North able to make more nuclear weapons and that is bad.

LAM: So what do you make of the sentiment that yet again Pyongyang has been rewarded for its bad behaviour and brinkmanship given that only a few weeks ago it restarted its Yongbyon facility?

CHINOY: Well there's a big debate on who bears the responsibility for this. My own view is that the deal in the summer was that the North Koreans provided a document, a declaration of their nuclear capabilities which was accepted by the United States and the other members of the six-party talks and in return the US was supposed to take North Korea off this terrorism list. What happened over the course of the summer as best I can tell was that critics within

the Bush administration, the so-called hardliners who were dubious about the whole idea of negotiating with North Korea were very critical of the declaration, they said it wasn't credible, it was inadequate, and so they pushed that the United States should insist that North Korea agree to a very intrusive set of verification measures before it be taken off the list. The North Korean response was that there's no language in any of the deals we signed that said we have to agree to this before being taken off the list, and if you're going to insist on that and use as leverage we're going to restart the program. So the North's view was it was the US reneging on its word and not the other way round. Well the reality is that there's no evidence that North Korea's been involved in terrorism since the late 1980s was the last known North Korean terrorist sponsored activity, which was the blowing up of the South Korean airliner in 1987. It matters for the North Koreans in the sense that Pyongyang's overall strategic goal here has been in accommodation with the United States in which Washington would recognise the Pyongyang regime and accept its legitimacy and the North Korean leadership and will I think believes that's critical to ensuring their survival in a hostile world.

LAM: It was also quite eager to step away from its pariah status?

CHINOY: Exactly and so for the world's only superpower to keep it on a list of terrorist states meant something, and equally to be taken off that list is seen by the North Koreans as an important step towards ending with they say if you look at their propaganda is Washington's "hostile policy".

LAM: What about North Korea's relationship with states such as Iran and Syria and its reported export of nuclear technology to such states? Isn't the US still miffed about that?

CHINOY: Oh certainly the United States is very miffed. One needs to draw a distinction, I don't think there's any evidence that the North Koreans have had serious nuclear cooperation with Iran. With Syria there was a site in the Syrian desert that Israel destroyed in an air raid in September of 2007 that appears to have been a nuclear reactor being built resembled very much the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, and there's some evidence of North Korean nuclear specialists having contact with the Syrians, although one needs to point out this appears to have been a building, there's no evidence whatsoever that any fissile material, the stuff you actually use to make a bomb with has ever been exported by the North Koreans.

LAM: And finally Mike Chinoy you've been in and out of North Korea, it's a country that you've been studying. What's the attitude in Pyongyang do you think towards its nuclear facilities? Do you think the leadership is very much wedded to having some kind of nuclear facility, nuclear capability or do you think Pyongyang is just using its nuclear ambitions as a bargaining chip with the international community to get what it wants?

CHINOY: I think the answer to that is unknown and it's probably the single most critical question right now. I mean the great tragedy of George Bush's time in office is that when he took office North Korea had enough weapons grade plutonium perhaps for one or two bombs. Today it has enough for six or eight or ten, it's staged a nuclear test, it's declared itself a nuclear power, and it's done so internally, the North Korean media made a big fuss about this to their own people. That makes it much, much harder to roll back, and it means that there's much greater investment by the North Korean sort of military industrial complex in the nuclear program, and therefore the North is in a position to demand a much higher price from Washington for rolling it back, which I think would include diplomatic recognition, a presidential visit, the lifting of all sanctions. It's not going to come soon if it comes at all, and it may well be even if the US is open to that if the North Koreans will decide in the end that like Pakistan, like India they want to have their bomb and have a good relationship with the US as well. And so far tragically they've gotten away with the nuclear breakout and they're sitting there at the end of George Bush's tenure with a large nuclear arsenal and no immediate

sign that they're going to get rid of it. Well the problem is as I documented in my book "Meltdown" coercion doesn't work and the US bogged down in a war in Iraq, bogged down in a war in Afghanistan is not in any position to take the ultimate coercive step of military action, and the Chinese and the South Koreans and others in the region would be very, very strongly opposed. So that leaves either engagement in negotiation or just ignoring the problem. And if you ignore the problem the North Koreans have a way of inserting themselves back on to your agenda whether you like it or not.

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