



HOLDOUT: Kim's intransigence has stalled negotiations

DONE TALKING?

It looks increasingly unlikely that the North Korean nuclear crisis will be solved through the six-party talks. So what will the U.S. do now?

By JIM ERICKSON

U.S. ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE Christopher Hill was clearly frustrated last week when a reporter in Seoul asked him why Washington isn't offering a "bold solution" to convince North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il to abandon his nuclear-weapons program. "Why are you blaming me?" asked Hill. "You should be blaming Kim Jong Il." Hill later told *TIME*: "Frankly, it is time to give Kim Jong Il a bit of a kick."

That last remark isn't quite on message. U.S. President George W. Bush still publicly insists that six-party talks involving the U.S., China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and North Korea, remain the most viable way to win in Kim. "It's better to have more than one voice sending the same message," he said last week. But evidence is mounting at the talks may be stalemated, perhaps permanently, leaving the U.S. and its negotiating partners to ponder riskier alternatives. After meeting with Chinese officials, Hill told the press, "The future of the talks is very much uncertain," and there are signs that Beijing is losing heart, too. Diplomats in Beijing say China's President Hu Jintao has postponed a visit to Pyongyang planned for this month because Kim has refused to return to the talks. "Hu won't go unless the visit is guaranteed to be a success," says a Chinese advisor to the Foreign Ministry. Meanwhile, the North's ability to wage nuclear war may be growing, thereby in-

creasing the ransom—food and fuel to prop up Kim's ailing economy—that he's expected to demand as the price of nuclear disarmament. North Korea recently shut down its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, raising concerns that it might be harvesting up to 8,000 spent plutonium fuel rods that could be used to build as many as six atomic bombs. Equally troubling, the director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, testified in Congress last week that the North may now be capable of putting nuclear warheads atop missiles that can reach Japan and perhaps even America's West Coast. Bush commented: "We don't know if he can or not, but I think it's best when dealing with a tyrant like Kim Jong Il to assume that he can."

With dialogue stalled and Kim's military threat looming larger than ever, the U.S. is increasingly debating its other options. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice raised the possibility of pushing the U.N. Security Council to exert pressure on Kim. Through the 2003 Proliferation Security Initiative, an international accord to curtail trafficking in weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. could possibly step up efforts to intercept North Korean shipments of contraband. But China, the only country with genuine influence over Kim, remains opposed to disruptions in North Korea's aid and legal trade—and with a seat on the U.N. Security Council, it can block any U.S. attempt to gain international backing for economic sanctions. Beijing fears that if North

Korea plunges into political and economic chaos, a flood of refugees might stream across the border into China.

Raising the stakes, Washington reportedly believes that the North, which in February declared that it was a nuclear power, may be preparing to prove it by testing a nuclear device. Seoul says it has no evidence for this, and there are suspicions that the U.S. could be stoking such fears merely to justify a tougher policy toward North Korea. If Pyongyang were to test a nuclear weapon, it might in fact play perfectly into Washington's hands, convincing the international community to get serious about imposing painful sanctions. "If North Korea takes such reckless actions as conducting a nuclear test, it will further deepen its isolation and take itself on a road where its future will not be guaranteed," warned South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon.

Kim's game of diplomatic poker is, of course, profoundly unpredictable. But it's likely that he'll resist the temptation to turn over his hole card by revealing conclusively that he does indeed possess weapons of mass destruction. The more probable outcome is that, through the six-party talks or some other vehicle, the frustrating diplomatic game will continue. "At some point, we are going to have to assess where we are and look for other measures" beyond the six-party talks, says Hill. "I am not prepared to say precisely when that will be." —Reported by Matthew Forney/Beijing and Kim Yooseung and Donald Macintyre/Seoul