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Voice of Russia-Russia

Duma wants US to withdraw non-strategic arms from Europe

Jan 20, 2011

When the State Duma starts to ratify the New START Treaty, it will offer Washington to mull the withdrawal of its non-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe, Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the Duma's Foreign Relations Committee said on Thursday.

He added that the proposal has been included in a ratification declaration, which, along with a ratification law, will be on the Duma's table on January 25.

Separately, Kosachev pointed to a link between strategic offensive and defensive weapons, which, he said, will be specifically reflected in the New START pact.

Earlier on Thursday, the Foreign Relations Committee recommended that Russian lawmakers give their final approval to the New START arms reductions treaty with the United States.

<http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/01/20/40553874.html>

Voice of Russia-Russia

Federation Council to take up new START on Monday

Jan 21, 2011

The Russian Parliament's upper house, the Council of Federation, is due to start debating the new Russian-American START treaty on Monday, January 24th.

The Federation Council's International Affairs Committee is due to hold a full-scale meeting next Monday to discuss the treaty, says the Committee Chairman Mikhail Margelov.

According to the MP, when debating about the document a while ago, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, the State Duma, pointed out the need for adopting a number of special statements. It was specifically suggested that the United States should bring back home the tactical nuclear weapons that Washington had deployed in Europe.

The new START is due to be ratified on the 25th of this month.

<http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/01/21/40601117.html>

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Google News

Russia puts brakes on further nuclear cutbacks

By Dmitry Zaks (AFP) – January 19, 2011

MOSCOW — The cheer over Russia's approval of a new nuclear disarmament treaty is short-lived as it masks Moscow's reluctance to ensure further cuts, threatening US President Barack Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world.

Russia is going through the final motions of ratifying a new START treaty that reduces old nuclear warhead ceilings by 30 percent and limits each side to 700 deployed long-range missiles and heavy bombers.

The pact will be submitted for a last vote to Russia's lower house of parliament on January 25 and almost certainly be ratified by the upper chamber the following day.

It was backed by the US Senate last month.

But analysts said that Moscow and Washington have little time to rejoice having put in motion the first round of mandated nuclear weapons reductions since the Cold War.

Obama, who pledged to "reset" Russia-US relations, sees START as only a stepping stone to further cutbacks, but a top Russian official made clear last week that the president's insistence for another round of negotiations later this year was not being received well in Moscow.

"I am convinced that before talking about any further steps in the sphere of nuclear disarmament ... it is necessary to fulfill the new START agreement," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters.

Only "then will be it be clear what additional steps should be taken to strengthen global security," he added.

In Russia's view, the round of disarmament which covers short-range tactical missiles dear to Moscow, balances out the West's current dominance in modern conventional forces.

The US Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists estimates that Russia has 2,050 deployed tactical warheads that could be deployed in small nuclear campaigns in its periphery. The United States has just 500.

Lavrov said Russia's commitment under the new START treaty will not be "fulfilled" for another seven years, and some analysts interpreted the comments as a flat-out rejection of Obama's latest overture.

"It seems Lavrov meant that these talks will not start for another seven years," said independent military commentator Alexander Golts.

"It is also important to note that Lavrov said these talks should be tied to space and conventional weapons," said Golts.

"This is basically a polite way of saying that we are not ready to talk about it."

The Russian foreign minister Lavrov spelled out a series of amendments that appear inherently unacceptable to the United States.

They include the prohibition of military space programmes that the Pentagon is currently studying and a requirement for all talks to include conventional warheads that the West is developing much faster than Russia.

Lavrov even suggested that the next round of talks should for the first time involve other countries -- presumably China and other emerging nuclear powers that may press their own demands on Washington.

"Most Russian experts see nuclear weapons as an equalizer," said Moscow's Centre for Disarmament Director Anatoly Dyakov.

"They believe that the removal of nuclear weapons must be accompanied by a full transformation of international relations that ensures that no country can suddenly decide to use force."

Military analysts estimate that it will take Russia another decade to develop a conventional weapons programme capable of re-establishing some semblance of parity with the West.

But they warned that it is highly unlikely that Russia will be able to delay the next round of nuclear negotiations for as long as suggested by Lavrov.

"We are going to have to start these whether we like it or not," said Institute for Strategic Assessment head Alexander Konovalov.

"The Americans will not stand for this kind of disparity."

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gd7wKtIOapv9G11nqyOkm7Y-yijQ?docId=CNG.cf3f9df69d3ee50f7a0a62316dbb5b65.b1>

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Chinese transparency needed on nuclear arms

By Nikita Perfilyev - 01/20/11 03:31 PM ET

On January 9, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates traveled to China to revitalize dialogue on military-to-military relations. This week, President Hu of China visits Washington and those discussions continue. On the agenda should be measures to increase the transparency of China's nuclear arsenal. With the New START treaty ratified by the Senate and pending ratification in the Russian Duma, increased openness from China will be critical to gradually expanding the disarmament process. And while the larger process of disarmament would benefit from increased Chinese transparency, there is little doubt that China would gain as well.

The driving force in US-Russian arms control has been a mantra that transparency fosters predictability and predictability ensures stability. Although challenges in U.S. - Russian relations persist, the New START agreement was signed more by partners than enemies and it extended a policy of openness regarding one another's nuclear programs. The same should be true for China, which no less than others, is interested in stability in order to secure economic growth. More predictability would enhance China's security, not diminish it.

In recent years, the major nuclear weapons states have all become more open regarding their arsenals. During the Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference the U.S. announced that it had 5,113 active nuclear warheads. After the election of the new government, the United Kingdom disclosed that it had 225 nuclear weapons. France stated several years ago that it has no more than 300 warheads. And while Russia indicated that it would consider making a similar disclosure after the ratification of the New START Treaty, it has already provided significant levels of transparency within the framework of the prior START I Treaty. Critically, all four countries also declared a moratorium on the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes.

China, however, has never disclosed the size of its arsenal. When it comes to describing the Chinese nuclear arsenal the most widely used phrase is "it is believed." China is believed to have stopped production of weapons-grade fissile material in the early 1990s, but it keeps this option open. As far as weapons are concerned, China is believed to have approximately 200 deployed nuclear warheads with about 40 in storage. Pentagon reports note, however, that in recent years China has increased its arsenal by 25 percent, the only official nuclear weapons state to do so. Meanwhile, during the Review Conference they blocked wording declaring a global moratorium on the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes and rejected language that mandated reductions and opposed the growth in the arsenals of nuclear-weapons states.

The official Chinese position has been consistent for 50 years. Beijing insists that it has exercised the utmost restraint, maintains the lowest arsenal of the five nuclear weapons states, and would never engage in a nuclear arms race. Some Chinese leaders argue that secrecy about China's nuclear forces enables them to rely on a doctrine of minimum deterrence, supported by a smaller

arsenal, but this is an argument that has outlived its relevance. China today is not comparable to China 30 years ago. China's economic growth has enabled it to increase military spending and changed its global standing. The veil of secrecy surrounding Chinese nuclear developments now leads some to overestimate and exaggerate the capability of the Chinese nuclear force and the speed of their modernization programs.

For years, China has been a rhetorical champion of nuclear disarmament. During the Cold War, China expressed its readiness to join the nuclear disarmament process at such time as the United States and the USSR reduced their nuclear arsenals by 50 percent. When it became clear that such reductions were indeed coming, China pivoted and declared that Russian and American arsenals should parallel China's before they would join negotiations. Although the reduced US and Russian arsenals are still far from the Chinese level, increased political momentum towards disarmament and the growing transparency of French and British nuclear forces put pressure on China to demonstrate a more practical, and less rhetorical, commitment.

While full transparency of Chinese intentions may not have been decisive in the latest US-Russian arms control agreement, ongoing uncertainty about China will produce a greater reluctance to pursue deeper reductions. And those reductions would benefit Chinese security as well.

Instead of feeding a vicious circle of mistrust regarding motives and intentions, China has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to nuclear disarmament, quiet skeptics and neutralize those who try to play a "China threat" card. The greatest beneficiary of such a change in policy would be China itself, who would enjoy the benefits of both enhanced stability and increased security.

Nikita Perfilyev is Research Associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and Fulbright Fellow at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/139183-chinese-transparency-needed-on-nuclear-arms>

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Joongang Daily-South Korea

Hu calls North's uranium a 'concern'

After summit, Obama says Chinese leader wants no more provocations

January 21, 2011

U.S. President Barack Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed concern about North Korea's uranium enrichment program and emphasized the importance of bilateral talks between North and South Korea in a joint statement yesterday.

Obama also told reporters that he and Hu agreed that North Korea must "avoid" further attacks on South Korea, although Hu didn't mention the topic in a joint press conference following their hourlong meeting on Wednesday afternoon, Washington time.

In yesterday's joint statement, Obama and Hu expressed concern over the "DPRK's claimed uranium enrichment program," which is the first time China has openly mentioned the program. Hu didn't mention the North's nuclear program during the press conference.

The presidents also found common ground over "heightened tensions on the Peninsula triggered by recent developments," and they emphasized "the importance of an improvement in North-South relations."

The two agreed that "sincere and constructive inter-Korean dialogue" is an essential step in thawing relations between the two Koreas, which could possibly lead to a resumption of six-party talks on stopping the North's nuclear program permanently.

North Korea showed a visiting U.S. scientist last November a facility that it claimed was enriching uranium. Since then, U.S. officials have been underscoring the threat from the North's nuclear weapons and missiles.

"[North] Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program is increasingly a direct threat to the security of the United States and our allies," Obama said yesterday alongside Hu. "The paramount goal must be complete denuclearization of the peninsula.

"I told President Hu that we appreciated China's role in reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula," he said, "and we agreed that North Korea must avoid further provocations."

Hu spoke after Obama at the press conference. It was his first Q&A with the international press since 2005.

"China and the United States will enhance coordination and cooperation and work with the relevant parties to maintain peace and stability on the peninsula, promote denuclearization of the peninsula, and achieve lasting peace and security in Northeast Asia," Hu said, maintaining a grim expression throughout. He did not mention North Korea directly in his statement.

The U.S. has been urging China to take a more active role in reining in North Korea after the attack on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island last November, as Beijing is the isolated North's most important ally. Several high-ranking U.S. officials visited China in the weeks before Hu's visit to Washington to reiterate the message.

Some analysts said that China's stance toward North Korea has not necessarily changed, despite the friendly tone between Obama and Hu at the summit.

"The two countries still have some negotiating to do, as it's difficult to say that the joint statement was issued after complete agreements from both parties," said Professor Kim Yong-hyun, an expert on North Korea at Seoul's Dongguk University.

"It's still unclear where things will take off from here [regarding North Korea]," a government source said.

The South Korean government reacted positively to the news from Washington, but said its position hasn't changed.

"There will be no change in the South Korean government's stance regarding its North Korean policies or the currently existing request that we have made," said an official from the Ministry of Unification yesterday following the joint statement and press conference.

"The government agrees that improvement in South-North relations and peace on the Korean Peninsula are important, and that constructive talks are needed to yield such results," the official added.

South Korea requested talks with the North to discuss Pyongyang's attacks on South Korea last year and steps toward denuclearization on Jan. 11. The South's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade said yesterday that a high-ranking U.S. official will visit South Korea after Hu's visit to the U.S.

<http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2931308>

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The Standard-Hong Kong

Seoul says yes to North talks invite

Friday, January 21, 2011

South Korea has accepted North Korea's offer of high-level military talks after months of tensions, the unification ministry in Seoul said.

That was in response to a message yesterday from North Korean defense minister Kim Yong Chun to his counterpart in the South, Kim Kwan Jin.

The unification ministry, which handles cross-border affairs, said it also accepted the North's suggestion of lower-level preparatory talks.

Seoul also proposed separate talks between high-ranking government officials on the issue of denuclearization.

In a statement, the ministry restated Seoul's terms for dialogue - that the North accept responsibility for two attacks over the past 10 months and show sincerity about nuclear disarmament.

The ministry said it will come to the talks "on condition North Korea takes responsible measures concerning the sinking of the [warship] Cheonan and the attack on Yeonpyeong Island and promises to prevent any recurrence."

"Separate high-level talks are absolutely necessary to discuss denuclearization," it added.

Cross-border relations hit a new low when South Korea last May accused the North of torpedoing the corvette Cheonan with the loss of 46 lives, a charge Pyongyang denies.

Tensions rose even higher after the North bombarded the South Korean border island of Yeonpyeong in November.

The artillery shelling killed four people, including civilians, and briefly sparked fears of all-out war.

http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=17&art_id=107296&sid=30995992&coln_type=1

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Asia Times-South Korea

North Korea set on third nuclear test

January 20, 2011

By Sunny Lee

BEIJING - Old habits die hard. North Korea's predilection to resort to provocation to seek attention, receive concessions, then behave for a while before getting up to its usual tricks is likely to continue this year.

That will be particularly so since the much-trumpeted summit between Chinese President Hu Jintao and United States President Barack Obama that ended on Friday didn't yield anything substantive on North Korea.

"Judging by the joint statement, there's nothing that suggests more was achieved in their meeting," said David Straub, a former senior foreign service officer at the US State Department in charge of Korea who now serves as the associate director of the Korean Studies Program at Stanford University.

John Delury, senior fellow at the Asia Society, a New York-based think-tank that focuses on Asia affairs, agreed. "There was no announcement of the resumption of the six-party talks," contrary to some expectations. "Nothing dramatic, only tentative."

On Thursday, South Korea made the appearance of accepting a North Korean proposal to hold high-level defense talks. Analysts view it more as the result of prodding from the United States and China, which urged the two Koreas to improve communication.

Yet, South Korea is not ready to engage North Korea, not after suffering two attacks from North Korea last year, one including the sinking of the corvette Cheonan that left 46 sailors dead and the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in which South Korean civilians were among the victims.

"So far, South Korea's stance is adamant," said Suh Choo-suk, who teaches at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies.

Seoul demands North Korea show "sincerity" of its will for denuclearization first before any major talks can proceed. But the North is on a different page as it doesn't see the South as the concerned "party" for that issue. North Korea has maintained its nuclear programs must be negotiated directly with the United States because it developing nuclear weapons serves as a deterrent to what it calls America's "hostile policy".

Since the start of the year, North Korea has been mounting a peace offensive. "If Seoul and Washington don't reciprocate the North's reconciliatory move, specifically, if the six-party talks don't resume any time soon and if the US doesn't engage the North through direct talks, North Korea is likely to go ahead with a nuclear testing," said Suh in Seoul.

"The possibility [for North Korea's nuclear testing] is always there," said Jin Canrong, an international relations expert at Renmin University in Beijing. "It wants to get more attention from the US. It also wants to get out from extreme international isolation."

Another nuclear testing by North Korea is something that has been speculated for quite a while - some observers see it not as a matter of "whether or not", but "when".

The much-awaited six-party talks, even if they resume, are not guaranteed to put a stop to any ambitions either. "North Korea conducted one test even when the [last round of] six-party talks was underway," Delury said.

Analysts widely believe North Korea is likely to carry out nuclear testing irrespective of its improved relations with the US and South Korea, because nuclear weapons under development require repeated testing to check progress and enhance their prowess.

Another reason North Korea is likely to settle for nuclear testing rather than armed provocations against its usual punch bag, South Korea, is that South Korean citizens' feelings toward their errant brothers have dramatically deteriorated.

In a poll conducted at the end of last year by Research Plus, a public survey group in Seoul, the change was obvious even among South Korean college students who tend to be more liberal and idealistic toward North Korea than the older generation. The percentage of the South's college students who perceived North Korea as a "partner for cooperation" was 45% in 2004 and 46% in 2007, but plummeted to 29% in the latest poll.

That tells something to North Korea. In the past, North Korea mounted provocations with the premise that South Korea wouldn't be able to respond militarily, fearing tremendous economic damage in industrial South Korea. But North Korea cannot trust that premise any more as it sees that South Koreans are willing to go ahead with planned military drills despite calls for restraint from China and Russia.

After suffering repeated North Korean provocations, the South Korean public is also beginning to demand that their government stand up to North Korea. South Korea has gone a step further by showing its resolve to respond militarily to the North's provocations. "Now, South Koreans are ready to fight. So North Korea is more cautious to provoke the South. They don't want to target South Korea. So, the other option is a nuclear or missile test," said Jin at Renmin University in Beijing.

Suh in Seoul agrees: "The kind of provocation North Korea did on Yeongpyong Island is risky on the part of North Korea too. So they want to target the US by carrying out a third nuclear testing or test-firing a long-range missile."

Straub believes that the timing of North Korea's nuclear testing will be decided by Pyongyang to use it as pressure on the US and South Korea to "reset the strategic chess board", for example, "to have negotiations but to have them on their terms".

Importantly, China's influence on North Korea will be tested. Beijing has repeatedly expressed its position against the North's nuclear testing. Pyongyang's going ahead with a nuclear testing would be a slap in the face to China.

"If North Korea wants to do it, it has to think about China's attitude. China's attitude is crucial whether there will be another nuclear test by North Korea. China will never give open support for its nuclear test," said Yu Yingli, a North Korea expert at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies.

Yet, Yu admits China's influence on North Korea is limited. "North Korea is a nation that doesn't follow another country's orders. It always does what it wants to do, not what China wants it to do," she said, adding, "It will hurt China's feelings. North Korea has to think about it."

Undoubtedly, North Korean leaders, in making a decision on a third unclear test, will think about China's reaction in terms of what dates for testing and public statements would cause the least offense to China, according to Straub, the former US State Department official.

"North Koreans at least will try to create a circumstance that appears to force them to go with the nuclear testing."

<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MA22Dg01.html>

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Asia Times

Seoul wants Obama to get serious

18 January 2011

By Donald Kirk

SEOUL - The United States is talking tough but not tough enough for South Korean leaders when it comes to standing firm against North Korean entreaties to sit down and talk.

South Korea's worries about the US position were clear when President Lee Myung-bak met Friday with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates on the last appointment his five-day swing through the capitals of Northeast Asia.

After Gates expressed qualified openness to negotiations with North Korea, Lee reminded him of the need to settle the North Korean nuclear issue before the North celebrates the 100th anniversary of the birth of its late "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung in April 2012. An official at the Blue House, the center of presidential power here, said Lee emphasized the issue after Gates had said renewed talks with North Korea were possible if the North ceased "dangerous provocations" and took "concrete steps" to meet its obligations.

Strong though Gates' words may have appeared, South Korean officials found them upsetting for one major omission. They said nothing specific about longstanding demands for North Korea to show signs, signals, or a polite mention if nothing else, about its nuclear program as a prelude to renewing six-party talks that North Korea has called for "with no preconditions".

South Korean officials are scarcely hiding their misgivings as US President Barack Obama primps and preens to receive China's President Hu Jintao at the White House on a state visit with all bells and whistles on Wednesday. The basic message from Seoul to Washington: South Korea wants Obama and Hu to get serious about getting rid of North Korea's nukes.

South Koreans know very well Hu will focus on renewing six-party talks sans "preconditions", as North Korea is demanding, and are again beseeching the US to stand fast by its Korean ally. Hu confirmed South Korean worries in written responses to questions by the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post in which he credited "joint efforts by China and other parties" for bringing about "signs of relaxation" of tensions.

Why not "engage in active interactions", resume "dialogue and consultation" - and "move forward" all in accordance with the joint statement of September 19, 2005, calling for "an appropriate solution to the Korean nuclear issue" and "lasting peace and stability on the peninsula".

The view from the Blue House can be paraphrased as we've heard all that stuff before, nothing worked, so who's to think it will work now? The only question here is whether Obama and company will fall for it. Or, more exactly, might the US, after all the nice talk about the enduring nature of the alliance, try to persuade South Korea to back down from its demands for North Korea to apologize for the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in the Yellow Sea in November and the sinking of the navy corvette the Cheonan in nearby waters in March.

Or, since North Korea has proudly boasted of shelling Yeonpyeong, how about apologizing for that incident, in which two South Korean marines and two civilians were killed? That much, at least, the Blue House believes North Korea can do. As for the sinking of the Cheonan, in which 46 sailors died, no one expects North Korea suddenly to 'fess up for the deed, in which it goes on denying any role.

"North Korea needs to settle the issue of provocations," said Hahm Chai-bong, director of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, suggesting that one apology, for the Yeonpyeong shelling, might suffice. And then, what is still less likely, he added, "North Korea should go back to previous freezing" of its nuclear program.

That phraseology no doubt means no more tests but offers no guarantee the North won't go on enriching uranium for the Yongbyon nuclear complex, fabricating ever more nuclear devices on a brand new 20-megawatt reactor that the North showed off to American nuclear physicist Siegfried Hecker in October. The output of that reactor would be in addition to the dozen or so warheads already produced at the old five-megawatt plutonium reactor in the same complex.

Then, almost incidentally but crucial to South Koreans, there's the question of inter-Korean dialogue. While calling for renewing the six-party talks, last held more than two years ago in Beijing, the North is saying nothing about preliminary talks with South Korea. The North's position has been, we'll talk to the South about trade, family visits, tourism, but we're only dealing with the US on the nuclear issue or a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War.

The purpose of the talks all along has been to negotiate an end to North Korea's nuclear program, but influential Koreans are sure North Korea has no intention of abandoning its nukes. The construction of a new reactor has convinced everyone here that North Korea, by returning to talks, may put off more incidents for a while but will do nothing to resolve to get rid of its nukes.

Gates, meeting South Korea's Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin, did nothing to reassure Koreans by saying that diplomatic engagement should begin with talks between North and

South Korea and six-party talks could resume only if North Korea showed it could be "productive" and "in good faith".

Gates' remarks came after fence-mending stops in China and Japan. In three days in China, he sought to reopen communications with military leaders upset by US arms sales to Taiwan. In Japan, he defended the need for the US to keep 49,000 troops in the country for defense against both North Korea and China, which he warned might "behave more assertively toward its neighbors" if US troops were withdrawn.

Incredibly, Gates may have gotten his messages across to the Chinese and Japanese more effectively than he did in South Korea. Defense Minister Kim, standing beside him, said pointedly "strong force is the only way to deal effectively" with the North - a view not echoed by Gates.

Former US nuclear envoy Christopher Hill, who negotiated with North Korea during the presidency of George W Bush, insisted, however, that getting the North to do away with its nuclear program remained the top priority. "We cannot walk away from that," Hill said. "We really do not have the option of leaving North Korea to have its nuclear weapons." Hill, in a talk at the Asan Institute, defended the record of the six-party talks in getting North Korea to shut down the five-megawatt reactor but said the North Koreans "lied on their declaration" about uranium enrichment. "We need more than talks," he said. "The North Koreans have demonstrated they did not deal with the process seriously."

Korean officials are especially convinced North Korea has no notion of giving up its nuclear program in the run-up to the centennial of the birth on April 16, 1912, of Kim Il-sung, who died on July 8, 1994. Kim's son and heir, Kim Jong-il, suffering from a variety of ailments, is believed anxious to display the country's strength while preparing for his son, Kim Jong-eun, who turned either 28 or 29 on January 8, to succeed him.

"This year is an important time in resolving inter-Korean issues," President Lee was quoted as telling Gates. "I hope South Korea and the US will cooperate and do their best to settle the North Korea issue" - a phrasing that appeared to show less than full confidence in US solidarity on the issue.

Donald Kirk, a long-time journalist in Asia, is author of the newly published Korea Betrayed: Kim Dae Jung and Sunshine.

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<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MA19Dg04.html>

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Washington Post-US

Iran sees progress at talks, others demurr

By GEORGE JAHN

The Associated Press

Friday, January 21, 2011; 8:01 AM

ISTANBUL -- Iran said differences were narrowing Friday at talks with six world powers looking for curbs on Tehran's ability to turn its nuclear program toward making atomic arms, but others said it was too early to speak of progress.

"Compared to the Geneva talks, the negotiations in Istanbul are being held in a more positive way," Iranian delegate Abolfazl Zohrevand said, referring to talks in the Swiss city that ended last month with an agreement on nothing more than to meet again in Turkey. "There are good signs that the two sides will make progress."

A diplomat familiar with the talks, however, said the two sides stated their positions then broke for a buffet of chicken saltimbocca with smoked tomato squash, steamed seabass, ravioli, baldo pilaf with peas, couscous, grilled vegetables cheeses and deserts. The diplomat asked for anonymity in exchange for commenting on the closed meeting.

The six powers - China, Britain, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany - hope to nudge Iran toward acknowledging the need to reduce worries that it might turn its enrichment program to making weapons.

Tehran denies such aspirations, insisting it wants only to make nuclear fuel. But concerns have grown because its uranium enrichment program could also make fissile warhead material, because of its nuclear secrecy and also because the Islamic nation refuses to cooperate with attempts to investigate suspicions that it ran experiments related to making nuclear weapons.

While the six would like to kickstart talks focused at freezing Iran's uranium enrichment program, Tehran has repeatedly said this activity is not up for discussion. Instead, Iranian officials are pushing an agenda that covers just about everything except its nuclear program: global disarmament, Israel's suspected nuclear arsenal, and Tehran's concerns about U.S. military bases in Iraq and elsewhere.

"We want to discuss the fundamental problems of global politics at Istanbul talks," said Iranian chief negotiator Saeed Jalili. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suggested any push to restrict the meeting to Iran's nuclear program would fail.

Zohrevand told The Associated Press that compromise by Iran's negotiation partners was moving the talks forward.

"They didn't get what they had hoped to get from pressure and sanctions," he said. "They are showing some flexibility. This is helping both sides to be optimistic."

Tehran is under four sets of U.N. Security Council sanctions for refusing to cease enrichment and other activities that could be used to make nuclear weapons, and Iran came to the table warning that it was in no mood to compromise.

"Resolutions, sanctions, threats, computer virus nor even a military attack will stop uranium enrichment in Iran," Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency, told Iranian state TV.

He was alluding to U.N. sanctions imposed on Iran, apparent damage to the enrichment program due to the Stuxnet malware virus - thought to have been created by Israel or the U.S. - and threats of possible military action by Israel or the U.S. if Iran remains defiant.

But British Foreign Secretary William Hague said the Iranians must "show in these negotiations that they are prepared to discuss the whole of their nuclear program."

The diplomat said EU Foreign Affairs chief Catherine Ashton, speaking on behalf of Iran's six interlocutors, would urge the Iranian side in her opening address to recognize the need to discuss international concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

Ashton, he said, would renew a 2008 offer providing Iran technical and logistical support for peaceful nuclear activities as well as trade and other incentives in exchange for its willingness to focus on its atomic program.

One development to watch for, he said, would be readiness by Jalili to meet U.S. counterpart William Burns in a bilateral meeting. While the Iranians met several delegations at the Geneva talks, they refused a U.S. overture to sit down one-on-one.

As a subset of the talks, discussions could be held on reviving an offer to exchange some of Iran's enriched uranium for fuel rods for Tehran's research reactor.

First made in late 2009, that offer was supported by the six powers as a way of reducing Iran's enriched stockpile, thereby potentially delaying its ability to manufacture a nuclear weapon. But it lapsed over Iranian conditions and later the realization that it no longer made sense to discuss shipping out the original amount, as Iran continued adding to its enriched uranium trove.

The diplomat said any agreement to explore reviving those talks should be seen only as a confidence-building measure and should not detract from the ultimate goal of curbing Iran's enrichment activities.

The nuclear talks are being held in the Ciragan Palace, resplendent with marble fittings, balconies and chandeliers, along the Bosphorus strait, which divides Istanbul between the Asian and European continents. Fire destroyed the former Ottoman palace in the early 20th century, but the building was restored two decades ago and part of the grounds were turned into a five-star hotel.

Associated Press writers Ali Akbar Dareini, Christopher Torchia and Suzan Fraser contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/21/AR2011012100845.html>

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Asia Times

Israel drums up heat on Iran

January 20, 2011

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

In the aftermath of Israel's admission that Iran may be several years away from acquiring nuclear weapons capability, the chances have declined that Israel will strike Iran's nuclear facilities in the foreseeable future.

That doesn't stop Tel Aviv from frantically trying - to no avail - to rekindle the military option as it sees the undesirable ramifications of the latest intelligence estimate that sanctions on Iran mean it won't be able to build an atomic weapon for at least a few years yet.

With the genie of a reduced Iran proliferation risk already out of the bottle, it will take Herculean efforts to convince the international community that Iran today represents an "existential threat" to Israel warranting military action.

Iran's envoy to the UN, Mohammad Khazaee, on Tuesday emphasized the importance of upcoming talks between Iran and world powers in Istanbul for confidence building. He said in New York that the West has made serious errors about Iran and lost opportunities for cooperation in resolving regional issues.

"We are not going to accept suggestions based on pressure and threats," Khazaee told reporters. "It is not going to work to put a knife in the neck of somebody, or a sword, and at the same time asking him to negotiate."

Saeed Jalili, Iran's main negotiator, will meet representatives of Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States in Istanbul on Friday and Saturday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's shrewd salesmanship of war on Iran is now stuck in the self-inflicted mud of ambiguity, and it is hardly surprising that we are now witnessing a backtracking on the part of Mossad's former head, Meir Dagan, who retired earlier this month. It was Dagan who threw cold water on the military option by telling Israeli parliamentarians just before retiring that Iran was unlikely to get weapons capability before 2015. He is now quoted in the Israeli press as recanting his statement and is instead singing a tune more agreeable to Tel Aviv that Iran may get its bomb much sooner.

A main reason for the dim prospect of military action against Iran is that already Iran has come under attack in the form of cyber-warfare, a new dimension of military warfare that infected computers at Iran's nuclear facilities. According to a New York Times report this weekend, a joint Israel-American operation based in Israel was responsible for the cyber-attack last year, reportedly alarming some Russian scientists working at the Bushehr power plant, who warn of a Chernobyl-type meltdown as a consequence of the Stuxnet computer virus attack.

This, together with the recent spate of assassinations of Iran's nuclear scientists, which has been attributed by Iran's authorities to joint Israeli, American and British covert operations, may have resulted in a temporary setback for Iran but at the same time have hardened Tehran's resolve. Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Jalili, has said that Iran will not discuss its uranium enrichment program at the nuclear talks in Istanbul.

Jalili's statement to a delegation of foreign diplomats who visited Iran's nuclear facilities on January 15 and 16, as well as to US television networks, comes at a crucial pre-Istanbul environment that favors Iran in many respects.

Firstly, irrespective of the cold shoulder that Western powers gave to Iran's nuclear invite to the nuclear facilities, Iran's initiative, and the positive response that it received from 120 member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, has strengthened Iran's negotiating hand.

Second, the recent revelations on Iran's problems with its centrifuges due to the Stuxnet cyber-attack have diminished the weight of the military option and, as a result, Iran is less threatened, and is therefore going into the Istanbul talks with a measure of unprecedented confidence.

Third, Iran has threatened to terminate the multilateral nuclear talks process if the Istanbul meeting ends in failure, and it has added another subtle threat; that is, Tehran would continue enriching uranium at 20% and even higher if the other side refuses to agree to Tehran's request for nuclear fuel for its Tehran reactor.

Another, more implicit, warning that is embedded in Tehran's pre-Istanbul action is that Iran's nuclear transparency and the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA's) access to Iran would suffer if there is no agreement on a proposal for an international nuclear fuel swap to produce medical isotopes.

According to a Tehran University political science professor, who spoke with the author on the condition of anonymity, the IAEA is well aware of the "serious damage to its reputation as well as its safeguard agreements with Iran in case there is no fuel swap".

Iran is entitled to receive technical assistance from the IAEA on the Tehran reactor and there would be some backlash against the IAEA within Iran's ruling circles, who are nowadays contemplating serious reactions vis-a-vis IAEA's failure to assist Iran on what is commonly referred to as a "humanitarian issue", in light of the Tehran's reactor's purely civilian purposes.

Meanwhile, Washington does not appear to have a clear strategy toward Iran. Gary Samore, the White House's point man on counter-proliferation, has been talking tough regarding further sanctions if the "Iran Six" talks in Istanbul fail to yield the intended result of convincing Iran to give up its uranium enrichment program.

Samore, a political scientist who has a thin record on complex proliferation matters, and who has a background of getting Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program completely wrong (see Building a case, any case against Iran Asia Times Online, September 14, 2005), has collaborated with a neo-conservative outfit, United Against Nuclear Iran, headed by a protege of John Bolton, the hawkish former US envoy to United Nations.

As a result, it would be rather disastrous for the Barack Obama administration, which claims to want a healthier relationship with Iran, to forfeit its Iran policy in the hands of Samore and others like him who appear to be more concerned about appeasing Israel than formulating a realistic policy on Iran. Interestingly, Samore has not made any public comment on Dagan's assessment of Iran's nuclear (in)capability.

Netanyahu's view of the downgraded assessment as an "estimate" is an implicit criticism that the former intelligence chief had spoken out of turn. Backtracking before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Monday, Dagan said, "The Iranian nuclear challenge will stay significant. This or that timetable won't change the fact that Iran is striving to achieve military nuclear capability, and in certain scenarios can shorten the time" it takes to have nuclear weapons.

"Israelis want war on all fronts," says the Tehran professor, adding "they are on verge of war with Hamas, with Lebanon and Hezbollah, and of course they keep threatening Iran. They only understand the language of war and conflict."

Perhaps if the US and its Western allies sign an agreement with Iran on the fuel swap and, furthermore, reach a better understanding with Tehran on areas of common concern, such as regional security, then this could force Israel to re-think a one-dimensional, counter-productive approach that does not even serve Israel's own national interests. As long as there remains no paradigmatic shift in Israel's militaristic discourse, this may be purely wishful thinking.

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MA20Ak01.html

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Washington Post-US

Turkey hosts nuclear talks for Iran, U.N. Security Council members, Germany

By Gul Tuysuz
Friday, Jan 21, 2011

ISTANBUL - Turkey again took on the challenge of facilitating discussion between Iran and the international community when Iranian officials and representatives of the U.N. Security Council's five permanent members and Germany convened Friday for nuclear talks in Istanbul.

Turkey's official role during the talks is that of host, as the European Union's foreign affairs chief, Catherine Ashton, emphasized last week in a preparatory visit to Istanbul. "The negotiations began with the P5-plus-1, and we are right to continue the way that we have started," Ashton said.

Nevertheless, Turkey's involvement in Iranian nuclear talks represents an important part of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's efforts in the Middle East.

Ankara has been striving to attain greater influence in the region, chiefly through pursuit of Davutoglu's policies of "zero problems with neighbors" and "strategic depth." The two-pronged approach focuses on working through points of contention with neighboring countries to promote regional stability and prosperity.

"Turkey has the most to lose if the situation in the region gets worse," said Arzu Celalifer Ekinci, a Middle East policy analyst.

In May, Turkey and Brazil brokered the Tehran Declaration, a nuclear fuel swap deal, on the eve of a Security Council vote on sanctions against Iran. The United States and its European partners rejected the deal, arguing that it came too late and offered too little: The amount of enriched uranium to be swapped was inadequate, they said, and the declaration would hinder a new round of sanctions.

The rebuff prompted Turkey to temporarily curtail its nuclear mediation efforts. "When the voices criticizing Turkey's involvement in the Iranian nuclear talks grew louder, Turkey chose, as it should have, to back off a bit while still continuing its efforts," Ekinci said.

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran, however, remain relatively close as Ankara seeks to increase trade and regional cooperation with Iran. Davutoglu and his Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, met Tuesday to discuss not only the nuclear negotiations but also the recent developments in Lebanon.

Turkey's increased involvement, not just with Iran but throughout the Middle East, has become a cornerstone of the country's more hands-on approach to foreign policy.

Turkey's efforts to help resolve the crisis in Lebanon have included joining Syria and Qatar for a

trilateral meeting in Damascus, as well as a trip to Beirut by Davutoglu. That mediation attempt was suspended Thursday.

Turkey was also a facilitator of the Syrian-Israeli talks last year, although that effort also proved unsuccessful. Turkey's own relations with Israel soured in June after an Israeli raid on a Turkish aid ship headed to the blockaded Gaza Strip resulted in the deaths of nine Turks.

Turkey withdrew its ambassador to Israel, but the two countries maintain close economic ties. Foreign Ministry officials have not ruled out normalizing relations if Israel agrees to apologize for the raid and offer compensation to the families of the victims.

Davutoglu has repeatedly stressed that his "zero problems with neighbors" policy extends to all of Turkey's neighbors.

That policy is "great in theory, but very difficult in practice," Ekinici said.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/20/AR2011012002794.html>

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