

U.S. Lawmakers, Officials Seek End to NK Nuclear Aid

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As diplomats seek to negotiate an end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, some U.S. lawmakers and Bush administration officials are pushing to end a program designed to provide North Korea with civilian nuclear energy.

Since last year, the United States and several allies have been building two light-water reactors in North Korea whose construction was a key component of the 1994 Agreed Framework, under which North Korea agreed to freeze its plutonium-based nuclear weapons program in exchange for the reactors and other aid. In 1995 the United States, South Korea, and Japan established the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to build the two reactors. KEDO remains in the early stages of its work—having established basic infrastructure and poured concrete for the first reactor—but none of the nuclear components for the reactor have yet been delivered.

Reuters reported on August 26, the day before negotiations commenced between North Korea and the United States and four other countries, that the program to build nuclear reactors in North Korea would probably be suspended in September. Citing U.S. officials, the report said the suspension was a compromise between the United States, which wants to end the program entirely, and South Korea and Japan, which prefer a suspension.

In addition, a June South Korean embassy release had said the United States has proposed stopping the construction of two reactors in North Korea, but the release said South Korea opposes such a move.

A State Department source, however, said August 26 the United States was not lobbying for a suspension. He said decisions about KEDO's future would be made by its board when it meets in September.

A diplomatic source familiar with KEDO and with the negotiations said a suspension of KEDO's work would probably result in the program's demise. "KEDO is like a train—it's hard to stop and hard to get back on track," the source said. He said there was less than a 50 percent chance the program would be restarted after a suspension.

Meanwhile, some members of the U.S. Congress are seeking to ensure that KEDO will not continue, regardless of decisions taken by the Bush administration or other KEDO member states.

An amendment to the House energy appropriations bill that passed July 18 would prohibit the government from allowing U.S. hardware or technical information from being transferred, directly or indirectly, to states the United States identifies as sponsors of terrorism.

Representative Christopher Cox (R-CA) said he is confident the Senate will approve similar language to end U.S. support for the reactors project and that President George W. Bush would sign it into law. A spokesman for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-IN) said he expected one or more senators would add similar language to the Senate bill.

Cox said he has spoken with a number of senators' offices and has received especially strong support from Senator John Kyl (R-AZ). In an August 20 op-ed in the Asian Wall Street Journal, Kyl

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wrote, "After eight years of the Agreed Framework...the result was not one, but two North Korean nuclear weapons programs." He advocated a hard-line stance, adding, "History shows it is futile to negotiate with Pyongyang as if it were a normal government."

Cox and Kyl, along with Representative Edward Markey (D-MA), have opposed the project since its inception. In January, Kyl sponsored a bill to prohibit "certain" aid to North Korea or KEDO. The bill had seven co-sponsors, including Senator John McCain (R-AZ), a senior member on the Armed Services Committee; Senator Evan Bayh (D-IN), a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence; and Senator Elizabeth Dole (R-NC), an Armed Services Committee member.

Congressional critics of the legislation have suggested that it is irrelevant because the Bush administration has decided not to request funding for KEDO. Cox disagreed: "I think that's exactly wrong, because they're still pouring concrete." He added, "We haven't put our foot down and said no yet."

In addition, Cox said simply declining to fund KEDO would be an unclear and ineffective signal because it would leave open the possibility of other countries continuing to build the reactors with U.S. technical support. Cox said the language in the amendment would prevent even foreign countries and companies from continuing construction, since U.S. technology is vital to the designs. "If this language remains in the legislation, this will be the end of it," Cox said. "There remains this haze of ambiguity, and I want to make sure this is all transparent."

But the State Department source said congressional action would not necessarily limit the administration's options or spell the end of KEDO. "One of the nice things about the Congress is that Congress can pass one bill today and tomorrow, if conditions change, pass another bill," he said.

Some supporters of negotiations with North Korea express concern that terminating support for KEDO could make matters worse. Erasing ambiguity might be counterproductive, according to the foreign diplomat familiar with KEDO. He said suspending the reactors project and making its resumption contingent on North Korean cooperation would be a valuable bargaining tool, which would be lost if the program is canceled. "You need the carrot and the stick—everybody sees the stick, after Iraq, but you also need to show the carrot," he said.

The diplomat also said unilateral action by the United States might strain relations with South Korea and other U.S. allies at a time when the international community is seeking to present a united front. South Korea, in particular, has advocated for negotiations with North Korea. "If you want to really get rid of this difficulty with North Korea, and if at the same time you want to avoid a war, that means you have to engage them," he said.

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