

Cheney's N. Korea Nuke Scandal Unravels

by Kathy Wolfe

Senator Richard Lugar's Foreign Affairs Committee on Jan. 20-21 heard testimony from Dr. Siegfried Hecker, former chief of Los Alamos nuclear laboratory—on his trip to North Korea Jan. 7-10—which questions Bush Administration assertions that North Korea has a clandestine uranium weapons program. In fact, one of the two key issues of the hearings was to determine “whether North Korea has a highly-enriched uranium (HEU) program,” or not, as Lugar put it in his opening statement. Hecker said he had no evidence of an “alleged” uranium program, and that North Korean officials instead offered extensive evidence of enriching spent fuel to plutonium. Hecker saw no evidence that the D.P.R.K. has “the ability to go from plutonium metal to a nuclear device.”

China, meanwhile, is about to recommend eliminating the uranium issue altogether from the Six-Power Talks on North Korea, diplomatic sources said. China's top negotiator, Ms. Fu Ying, told Japanese and South Korean counterparts on Dec. 29 in Seoul that “North Korea has denied having a uranium weapons program; China also did not believe that it had one; and the U.S. government briefing provided to China has not been sufficient to convince China.” Beijing has been Washington's major ally in the North Korea situation.

The U.S. is paying the price for bad intelligence on Iraq's nuclear weapons, Chas Freeman, former Republican assistant secretary of defense, told the *Washington Post* Jan. 7. “Post-Iraq, the credibility of U.S. intelligence is not very high” around the world, he said. Increasingly, “we've been the odd man out” among the five nations meeting with North Korea; the others are angry that “we offer all sticks and no carrots.”

EIR broke this story Aug. 8, 2003, reporting otherwise suppressed findings of U.S. Naval War College Research Chief Dr. Jonathan Pollack, that the CIA and other agencies believe evidence for a uranium program was “far from definitive”; that “North Korea had no operational enrichment facility”; and that “the intelligence community believed that North Korea confronted daunting obstacles. . . even to acquire the production capabilities that might ultimately permit such an option.”

U.S. diplomats say Vice President Dick Cheney ignored these reports, (as he did reports by Ambassador Joseph Wilson that there was no evidence Iraq imported uranium from Niger), and dictated a letter taken to Pyongyang by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly in October 2002. It charged North Korea with a secret uranium weapons program violat-

ing the 1994 U.S.-D.P.R.K. Agreed Framework treaty. The Administration used the charge to rip up the treaty, touching off the current North Korea crisis.

Damn the Torpedos

President Bush's 2004 State of the Union speech Jan. 20, and the Jan 15 firing of South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan, reflect Cheney's pig-headed attempt to press on with this “Bush Doctrine” approach of deliberate confrontation, despite its failure and the growing international anger against it. In the eyes of many Asian commentators, Bush nearly repeated his January 2002 “Axis of Evil” comments, by criticizing North Korea and adding: “America is committed to keeping the world's most dangerous weapons out of the hands of the world's most dangerous regimes.”

Mr. Yoon was the key mover in Seoul of the alliance with Russia, China, and Japan, to push the United States toward a reasonable solution at the Six-Power Talks. Despite reports to the contrary, *EIR* believes he was forced out for standing up too strongly to the neo-cons in demanding a Six-Power solution.

But it's far from clear whether Mr. Cheney will have his way.

The Administration is so upset about their scheme falling apart, that Kelly called his Japanese and South Korean counterparts to Washington Jan 21-22, to demand they sign an agreement “endorsing the U.S. evidence that the D.P.R.K. is manufacturing HEU for weaponization,” South Korean state radio reported Jan. 23. South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-hyuck told Washington press after the talks Jan. 22, that Seoul and Tokyo had agreed. “South Korea has no question about Washington's judgment and analysis of North Korea's HEU program,” Lee said, since “James Kelly confirmed North Korea's development of uranium-based nuclear weapons during his visit to Pyongyang” in October 2002.

Lee said that the three had adopted Washington's demand that North Korea follow Libya's recent action and unilaterally dismantle all WMD. This demand is a “deal breaker” for the Six Power Talks, as Pyongyang has already reiterated that they will not simply “come out with their hands up.” Lee had to admit that “there are no signs that the talks will be held next month.”

Plenty of Plutonium

The real absurdity of the uranium charge, is that everyone agrees, *Pyongyang included*, that North Korea has significant stocks of plutonium which it is moving to weaponize. They may, as the CIA often states, already have one or two such bombs. But, as Dr. Pollack notes, there is no reason for the D.P.R.K., with enough plutonium in hand to make a half-dozen bombs, to embark on a much more costly highly-enriched uranium program, for which it lacks the complex equipment, and which would require many more years' construction and development.

Yet, to show North Korea was part of his “axis of evil,” Cheney sought to catch them in a violation of the U.S.-D.P.R.K. Agreed Framework treaty, so he could rip the treaty up. Pyongyang’s plutonium stocks were permitted under the treaty—thus, Cheney’s neo-cons had to cook up a violation on another account (i.e. the HEU issue) to deliberately manufacture the latest crisis with the D.P.R.K.

North Korea loudly publicized its “plutonium path to the bomb,” as their stated purpose for inviting Dr. Hecker of Los Alamos, Stanford University Asia expert John Lewis, former top U.S. government negotiator Charles “Jack” Pritchard, and several other experts to tour the large Yongbyon plutonium reactor complex Jan. 8-9. Hecker told the Senate at length, as he did major press afterwards, that the North Koreans showed them the entire complex; had emptied the spent fuel rods previously frozen under UN inspection during the Agreed Framework; and claimed to have reprocessed the rods into plutonium. Hecker demanded to hold some bomb-grade plutonium in his hand, and was duly given a radioactive canister to handle. “Now we’ve shown you our deterrent,” the North Koreans told Hecker repeatedly, meaning: “we’ve proven that we’re making plutonium weapons, so the United States should be deterred from attacking us, unlike with Iraq.”

But Where’s the Uranium?

However, Dr. Hecker also told Lugar’s hearing that he found credible the Jan. 9 statements to his delegation by North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan, that the D.P.R.K. “has no facilities, no equipment, and no scientists trained in uranium enrichment.” With all that plutonium, why should they bother?

“There is a controversy about whether the D.P.R.K. admitted to having such a program,” Hecker said. “The disagreement concerns a difference between what D.P.R.K. officials believe they said and what U.S. officials believe they heard” during Kelly’s October 2002 trip. The Bush Administration maintains that Kelly confronted Pyongyang with proof it has a uranium bomb program and that Vice Foreign Minister Kang Suk-ju surprised Kelly by confirming it. But Hecker said the North Koreans had provided his delegation with a transcript of that 2002 meeting, which quotes Kang to say only, “We are entitled to have a nuclear program.” This was a general statement of national sovereignty, not an admission to the charge, North Korea has repeatedly stated.

When former U.S. Ambassador to Korea Donald Gregg visited Pyongyang in November 2002, and asked Kang what he had told Kelly, Kang put it in exactly these terms, as Gregg reported in a Washington press briefing at the time.

Hecker told the Senate that after handing over the transcript, North Korean Vice Minister Kim Gye Gwan “stated that the D.P.R.K. had no HEU program . . . (and) had chosen the plutonium path to a deterrent. It had no facilities, equipment or scientists dedicated to an HEU program, adding, ‘We can be very serious when we talk about this. We are fully

open to technical talks.’ ”

During questioning, Hecker added that Professor John Lewis “tried to give the vice minister a chance to sort of weasel out of this, saying, ‘Well, look, we’re not sure what constitutes a program. You know, maybe you don’t have a program, but maybe you have equipment.’ But the vice minister said, ‘We have no program, we have no equipment, and we have no technical expertise for enriching uranium. We decided to go the plutonium route some time ago, and that’s where our expertise is.’ ”

London Weighs In

Right on cue to bail out their Washington neo-con friends, London’s International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) Jan. 21 issued a report on North Korea which includes the uranium charge. IISS author Gary Samore then went on tour in Seoul, where he frontally pushed the uranium thesis. IISS is known for its 1994 report on how to Balkanize and split up China, and its antipathy in general to national sovereignty in Asia. Speaking Jan. 26 at the Seoul International Forum, Samore said the North could create a highly enriched uranium facility within one or two years. France and Germany, he said, stopped a North Korean vessel in the Suez Canal in February 2003, and discovered that the boat was transporting 200 tons of superstrong aluminum tubing, which he said could have been used to produce 75 kilograms of HEU, enough to produce three nuclear weapons.

However, Mr. Samore neglected to mention that the tubes could also be for civilian nuclear power. Uranium enrichment facilities can also serve “an entirely legitimate civilian purpose,” as Jonathan Pollack points out: “fabricating the low-enriched uranium (fuel enriched to 4.4% U-235) to power light-water reactors. Numerous signatories to the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] possess such reprocessing capabilities.” Pollack states that “the evidence was far from definitive” whether the D.P.R.K.’s plans were for legitimate 4.4% enrichment for fuel, or for the entirely different process of producing weapons-grade uranium highly enriched to 93% U-235.

Hecker, on the other hand, based on his on-the-ground inspections in North Korea, didn’t think he saw evidence the plutonium program could produce a detonating bomb or deliver it, let alone of a uranium program.

When senior North Korean official Li Gun approached Hecker at the end of his trip, to announce, “Well, we’ve shown you our deterrent.” Hecker replied: “No, you haven’t shown me a deterrent,” as reported in the press Jan. 21. “A nuclear deterrent has three elements: weapons-grade plutonium; a nuclear explosive device, and a delivery system. But this is like telling me, that just because you’ve got steel, you know how to build an automobile. . . . You showed me no facilities. You had me talk to no people that give me any indication as to whether you have the ability to go from plutonium metal to a nuclear device. I saw no such thing.”