

US, Japan turn up the pressure on Pyongyang regime

An explosive situation on the Korean peninsula

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A minor naval incident in the Sea of Japan last week has highlighted the potential for north-east Asia, and the Korean peninsula in particular, to be rapidly transformed into another arena, like the Middle East and the Balkans, for military intervention by the major powers.

On March 23, Japanese navy warships and planes backed by the country's coastguard chased two fishing vessels bearing false markings in waters off the western coast of Japan. The boats failed to heed orders to stop even when warning shots were fired across their bows and bombs were dropped from the planes. The pursuit, which lasted for hours, was finally called off when the vessels left Japan's air defence identification zone.

The following day the Japanese government called on North Korea to seize and hand over the two ships together with their occupants. According to authorities, the two boats had no visible fishing tackle, many electronic antennae and had fled towards North Korean waters. The military claims to have detected several MiG-21 fighters taking off from North Korea during the chase. The Pyongyang regime has denied any involvement in the affair and accused the Japanese government of staging the event as a means of whipping up public support for current legislative changes giving greater powers to the country's military.

Whether the North Korean accusation is true or not, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi certainly transformed a relatively minor incident into a major public issue by giving the go-ahead for the navy to fire on the two vessels and drop bombs--the first occasion since the country's Self-Defence Force was formed in 1954. The scale of the operation was also unprecedented. Four Japanese navy destroyers and six anti-submarine patrol aircraft, as well as nine coastguard patrol boats and two aircraft, were engaged in chasing the two boats. Government critics seized upon the failure of the navy to go further and fire on the ships, in order to call for changes to the rules of engagement that prevent Japanese warships from directly firing on boats unless fired on first.

The media also encouraged a hysterical response to the intrusion. Video footage of the naval chase was shown on TV. Commentators suggested the purpose of the mission was spying, drug smuggling, the kidnapping of Japanese citizens or other sinister aims. The right-wing *Sankei* newspaper even claimed that the two boats were just a diversion, which had allowed dozens of North Korean spies, trained in sabotaging transport and communication, to slip into the country undetected.

With the rival American and European powers actively pursuing their interests by military means in the Balkans and the Middle East, powerful sections of the Japanese ruling class are pressing for an end to the constitutional constraints on the country's military forces. Under its postwar constitution, Japan is prevented from employing "the threat or the use of force as the means of settling international disputes" and from maintaining "land, sea or air forces". Its powerful Self Defence Forces has

242,000 personnel, the latest in military hardware and a budget of about \$US400 billion, but is not legally permitted to operate outside a narrow perimeter surrounding Japan.

The latest events in the Sea of Japan have undoubtedly boosted Obuchi's chances of pushing new laws through the Japanese Diet, which would allow Japan to support US troops during a crisis within the region. Obuchi and his government have received an increase in popularity in the opinion polls following the incident. Four of the major parliamentary parties--the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partner, the Liberal Party, and two opposition parties, Democratic Party of Japan and New Komeito--have backed the naval action.

The LDP government is playing on other fears in relation to Pyongyang. Last August, a North Korean three-stage ballistic missile was fired across Japanese territory, sparking press speculation both in Japan and the United States that the Stalinist regime was developing the missile capacity to hit not only its near neighbours but also North America. The US State Department subsequently accepted North Korean claims that the rocket had been an attempt to place a satellite in orbit. But the acknowledgement has not prevented the US and Japanese governments from using the incident to step up demands on North Korea for a complete end to its development, production and export of missiles.

Last weekend, in a further attempt to create public panic, the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* claimed that the North Korean military had already deployed ballistic missiles. Quoting unnamed US military sources, the paper stated that a US spy satellite had confirmed that several Rodong ballistic missiles with a range of between 1,000 and 1,300 kilometres were in position north of Pyongyang. The leak coincided with a visit over the following two days by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Robert Einhorn to North Korea for high level talks aimed at shutting down the country's missile program.

Just as the Japanese government is using North Korea as a political lever to expand its own military role, the US administration has been preparing to demonise Pyongyang as the latest "rogue regime" to justify not only its own substantial military presence within the region but also direct military intervention. The US already has 37,000 troops stationed permanently in South Korea, and large military bases in Japan.

The last confrontation with North Korea was in 1994. Accompanied by considerable sabre-rattling, the US demanded that Pyongyang allow inspections of its Soviet-designed nuclear reactor, claiming that the equipment was being used as part of a program to develop nuclear weapons. The US moved B-2 bombers and anti-missile defences to augment its military presence in South Korea. The tense situation was eventually defused through a deal under which North Korea agreed to discontinue the use of its old reactor at Yongbyon in return for economic aid and new light-water reactors incapable of producing weapons-grade

nuclear fuel. Japan and South Korea were pressured to foot the largest portion of the bill.

The US administration used not only guarded military threats but its continuing economic blockade of North Korea to pressure the regime into accepting the agreement. Following the breakup of the former Soviet Union, the North Korean economy is in a shambles with the collapse of its export markets, crop failures and a protracted famine, which according to some estimates has claimed the lives of up to two million people over the last three years. According to a recent statement by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, only 10-20 percent of North Korean factories are operating as a result of the lack of raw materials, spare parts, fuel and energy.

The Clinton administration has used the economic catastrophe in North Korea as a lever to extract concessions from Pyongyang and to pursue its own military and political ends in the region. In the ruling circles in the US, the debate revolves around how to use the economic sanctions and military pressure to bring about the collapse of the Stalinist statelet in the most favourable way. As in the case of Iraq, US insistence that North Korea end its development of "weapons of mass destruction" is the pretext for direct political and military intervention in a key strategic area bordering Russia, China and Japan.

North Korea's firing of a sophisticated ballistic missile last August initially took Washington by surprise. But the Clinton administration quickly exploited the opportunity to advance plans for a Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) system capable of destroying North Korean rockets. The US proposal is for an anti-missile umbrella covering not only Japan and South Korea but also Taiwan. The latter is a calculated move not only against North Korea but also China, which claims Taiwan as one of its provinces. The announcement provoked protests from Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, who said the TMD scheme "would amount to an encroachment on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Late October, Clinton appointed the former Defence Secretary William Perry as US-North Korea policy co-ordinator. It was a significant concession to right-wing Republicans, who have been demanding a far more aggressive policy and threatening to cut off funds for US fuel oil supplies to North Korea, which was part of the 1994 agreement. The designation of the high-profile Perry to present a review of US policy on North Korea by May is a clear warning that the region is once again becoming a focus for American intervention.

Since Perry's appointment, Washington has intensified its demands on North Korea. Last year the US began insisting on inspections of a large new underground construction at Kumchangri, claiming the site was part of a nuclear program. Pyongyang's refusal resulted in protracted and bitter wrangling as the US threatened to tear up the 1994 agreement. Only in mid-March was a new deal reached allowing for multiple US inspections of the excavation in return for increased economic aid.

The dispute over the Kumchangri site may have been temporarily resolved but the US has other issues to use against North Korea. CIA director George Tenet told the US Congress last month that Pyongyang is on the verge of developing ballistic missiles able to carry large payloads and capable of hitting North America. "Dangerous as Saddam [Hussein of Iraq] is, I can hardly overstate my concern about North Korea. The situation there has become more volatile and unpredictable," he said.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the current talks over missile production in Pyongyang this week, it is virtually impossible for North Korea to fulfill all the US demands. As the operations of UNSCOM in Iraq demonstrates, even when a government provides unlimited access to its facilities, it is not possible to prove a negative proposition--that no capacity exists for developing so-called weapons of mass destruction. As soon as one possibility is ruled out, other even more provocative ones are invented and tabled.

Even then, there are many other pretexts for keeping the North Korean

pot on the boil. With little evidence other than highly dubious reports supplied by South Korean intelligence services, the Congressional Research Service produced a report alleging that the North Korean regime is directly involved in widespread drug trafficking and other illegal activities, using its diplomats to smuggle goods across borders. On March 5, senior Republican congressmen called on Perry to include allegations of illicit narcotic production in his report on North Korea.

During a visit to South Korea last week, Perry all but admitted that the US was considering pre-emptive military strikes against North Korea. According to a CNN report on March 26, Perry did not rule out a military attack but told reporters: "I believe the consequences of military confrontation would be so serious we should exhaust every diplomatic measure before we even consider that."

Perry is the co-author of a book entitled *Preventative Defence*. In its epilogue, Perry is critical of the so-called "sunshine policy" being pursued by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung to encourage North Korea to open up to trade and foreign investment. "It might not be safe to follow Kim Dae Jung's advice and wait for change to come to North Korea," Perry writes. "A continuing weapons of mass destruction program in North Korea would rob us of the time needed for Kim Dae Jung's engagement policy to work." In talks at the beginning of the month, Perry and Kim diplomatically avoided a public breach over North Korean policy but sharp differences remain.

South Korea is facing its own economic and social disaster. Kim's "sunshine policy" is aimed at opening up North Korea as a source of cheap labour to bolster the flagging profits of big business, as well as paving the way for ultimately reunifying the Korean peninsula on a capitalist basis. Over the last year, the founder of the Hyundai conglomerate, Chung Ju Yung, has made several visits to North Korea to negotiate substantial business investments, including the establishment of an industrial park on the west coast and the construction of an international tourist development at Mount Kumgang.

The North Korean Stalinists have established the Rajin-Sonbong free trade zone in a bid to attract international investment. Last September their parliament passed a constitutional amendment to establish "an independent accounting system" for each state-owned firm--a first step towards establishing these enterprises as independent, profit-making units. These steps, however, have failed in the past to encourage significant foreign investment despite the attraction of low wages enforced by a police state bureaucracy. According to South Korea's Central Bank of Korea, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the north contracted by 6.8 percent in 1997, the eighth successive year of negative growth.

There are major obstacles to open contact between North and South Korea, let alone any steps towards unification. Technically, the two countries remain at war with one another. In July 1953, the armistice signed in Panmunjom ended military hostilities in the Korean War but attempts to arrange peace talks and a permanent truce broke down. The division left Stalinists in control of the north while the south has been dominated for most of the last 45 years by right-wing US-backed military regimes.

Even as the so-called democrat Kim Dae Jung attempts to open up talks with Pyongyang, South Korean security laws make it a crime for anyone to travel to the north except with formal state approval, or to publicly defend the policies of the North Korean regime. Just recently, some of the world's longest serving political prisoners, who have been held for decades for supporting North Korea, were released from South Korean jails.

Until recently, North Korea has refused to recognise the legitimacy of South Korea, insisting that any talks over an end to the war should be with the US. Tentative negotiations involving the two Koreas, China and the US in 1996 bogged down and collapsed. In February, Pyongyang offered to hold high-level political talks with the south later in the year if the Kim

Dae Jung government abandoned joint military exercises with US military forces stationed in South Korea and repealed its anti-communist laws. South Korea has rejected both conditions in the past.

The situation on the Korean peninsula, with both countries in economic and social crisis, is highly explosive. The most dangerous role is being played by the United States. As Perry's comments indicate, Washington is "exhausting" various diplomatic options. As is shown in the Middle East and the Balkans, the US is willing to engage in the most reckless military adventures in order to advance its interests against those of its major rivals.



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