

US, Japan exert sharp pressure on North Korea over possible missile test

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11 August 1999

Sharp pressures are being exerted on North Korea by the US, Japan and South Korea to abandon any plans for a test firing of its long-range Taepodong II missile. Even though such a missile launch breaches no international treaties or any of the US-brokered agreements with North Korea, both the Clinton administration and the Japanese government have warned of “serious consequences” if the test proceeds.

Considerable international media attention is being focussed on the possible launching. As an article in the latest issue of the US magazine *AsiaWeek* noted: “It must be the most anticipated rocket launch since the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. For weeks, Western intelligence agencies have been predicting that North Korea will test-launch another multi-stage missile.”

Alleged facts mixed with rumour and opinion are fed to the media from unnamed intelligence and military sources, further fuelling speculation about the imminence of such a missile test and debate over the consequences and the type of “response” needed. The latest “reports” from an anonymous “senior US official” via Associated Press claimed that North Korea had delivered rocket fuel to its suspected launch site in readiness for the test and the country's radar sites expected to track the test flight had been active.

The US has a huge intelligence gathering operation targeted against North Korea. An August 2 article in the *International Herald Tribune* pointed out: “North Korea is at the centre of one of the most sophisticated surveillance stakeouts in history. U-2 spy planes photograph it daily. Electronic equipment on planes and ships and bases across Asia monitor its radio and telephone communications. Satellites orbiting in space can pinpoint a broken-down North Korean military truck and count the number of soldiers working on it.”

Talks between the two Koreas, the US and China in Geneva ended on Monday without agreement. Clearly concerned at the implications of the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia, North Korea has maintained the right to develop its military defence, including missiles. A report by North Korea's state-run news agency on Sunday stated: “We will go ahead with satellite and missile launch(s) whoever may say this or that. The US attempt to unleash a war against (North Korea) compels us to further increase the self-reliant defence capabilities.”

Any missile test is likely to lead to a further rapid escalation of tensions in north-east Asia. In an article headlined “Missile threat casts region-wide shadow,” the British *Financial Times* newspaper warned last week: “If North Korea fires a new ballistic missile in the next few weeks it could plunge north-east Asia into its biggest security crisis since 1994, when the North's threat to reprocess plutonium for nuclear weapons caused the US to consider staging a pre-emptive air strike.”

In 1994, the threat of US military action was only averted at the last minute through an agreement—the US-North Korea Agreed Framework—to replace North Korea's old Soviet-era nuclear reactors with new light water reactors incapable of producing plutonium. South Korea and Japan were talked into footing a large part of the multi-billion dollar bill while the US

promised to move towards ending the diplomatic and economic blockade imposed on North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

Any missile firing threatens to undermine the Agreed Framework and to return the Korean peninsula to the tense standoff that existed five years ago. Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura warned Pyongyang last weekend that Japan would halt its contributions to North Korea's nuclear program in the event of a missile launch, effectively destroying the agreement. For the first time, Komura also threatened to freeze the flow of money from Japan-based North Koreans to relatives back home. The money is a major source of foreign exchange for Pyongyang—estimated to be hundreds of millions of dollars a year from the quarter of a million North Korean residents in Japan.

According to the *Financial Times* article, the breakup of the Agreed Framework raises the possibility of military conflict. “The worst-case scenario is that the missile launch would force Japan to withdraw financing for the building of nuclear reactors in the North in spite of objections by the US and South Korea. Japan's defection from the project could cause the nuclear freeze deal to collapse and prompt the North to begin reprocessing plutonium. That might leave the US little choice but to respond militarily since it increases the chances of the North arming its missile with nuclear warheads.”

The most significant signal of the intention of the US and other powers to pursue a far more aggressive policy towards North Korea is the appearance of a growing number of inflammatory articles in the international media directed at demonising the country and its ruler Kim Jong Il. As in the case of Yugoslavia and Iraq, the purpose of such a campaign is to prepare public opinion for any US action—diplomatic, economic or even military—against North Korea should the missile launch take place.

The August 2 article in the *International Herald Tribune* is a case in point. Entitled “The Mystery and the Menace of North Korea,” the article brands the country a “poor, Dark Ages fortress” and President Kim Jong Il as running it “like Evel Knievel driving a motorcycle at 90 miles per hour towards Dead Man's Curve on a rainy night”. Pointing to the lack of food, medicines and basic freedoms, the two reporters conclude: “One of the cruellest regimes ever to rule a nation will carry its cloaked inhumanity into the new millenium.”

The tone and method is unmistakable. A crude case is being made for Kim Jong Il to be transformed into the Milosevic or Saddam Hussein of north-east Asia and for North Korea to be placed at the top of the US list of “rogue states”. The connection is made explicitly in an article in the *Australian Financial Review* written in June. Commentator Peter Hatcher draws a parallel between the deaths resulting from the current North Korean famine and Hitler's genocide of the Jews. “While Milosevic has been making his best efforts to purge up to 1 million ethnic Albanians, North Korea's Dear Leader is responsible for a policy-induced famine which today puts the lives of 6 million at risk,” he writes.

It is undeniable that hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, have

died from the disastrous famine in North Korea over the last five years. It is equally true that the Stalinist regime's methods of rule are undemocratic and brutal. But to pin the blame for the famine on the malevolent intentions of Kim Jong Il and his policies is to ignore the chief reason for the country's economic disintegration over last decade—the isolation resulting from an almost total economic and trade blockade maintained by the United States for decades. North Korea's economy is estimated to have shrunk by as much as 60 percent since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, its principal trading partner.

Far from centring on the disaster facing millions of North Koreans, the debate in US ruling circles has focussed on how best to exploit the economic and social crisis in North Korea to bring about the most favourable outcome for American interests. Over the past five years, the aim of the Clinton administration has been to use its limited food and fuel aid to extract political and military concessions from North Korea. The Agreed Framework for the dismantling of its plutonium-producing nuclear reactors was just a first step. In May, William Perry, former US Defence Secretary, and now special presidential envoy, visited Pyongyang to discuss a US proposal to lift economic sanctions on North Korea in return for an end to its testing, manufacture and sale of missiles—one of North Korea's few sources of foreign exchange.

Right-wing Republicans and sections of the media have, however, been bitterly critical of the Clinton administration's policy on North Korea. Branding it as “conciliatory,” Congressional Republicans blocked any watering down of the economic blockade, and made the limited US aid conditional on further concessions by North Korea. Earlier this year, fuel aid was thrown into doubt by allegations that Pyongyang was building a huge underground complex to house a nuclear weapons program. When in response to mounting threats, North Korea allowed a US team to visit the site in May, the inspectors were forced to concede that they could find no evidence to support the charges. All that has happened since May is that the pretext for ratcheting up international pressure on North Korea has shifted from nuclear weapons to missiles. And if North Korea fails to fire its missile, there are plenty of other pretexts in the pipeline—from allegations of officially-organised drug running and counterfeiting, to claims of kidnapping.

It is worth noting that those who press for a harder US line against North Korea and indict Kim Jong Il for the famine deaths, are the same ones who argue against providing even minimal assistance. The case for completely isolating North Korea—and, one must add, producing a humanitarian disaster of immense proportions—was recently put by Robert Manning, a former US State Department official and senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations. In an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times* of July 11 entitled “Time to Force the Endgame,” Manning argues that the Clinton administration should not assume that Pyongyang will be willing to dismantle its military in return for implementing market reforms and opening up its economy to foreign investors.

“The only way to really test the assumption is a willingness to disengage,” Manning writes. “If the collective response of the United States, Japan, and South Korea is to cut aid and restrict contact, a period of stewing in its own juices just might bring North Korea to the table. In any case, so long as US military deterrence is in place, the North has no military option except its own suicide. If the North demands to have its cake and eat it, too, a bit of what the British used to call ‘masterly inactivity’ may be its wisest course.”

Far more is at stake in the sharpening conflict in north-east Asia than the policies of the Kim Jong Il regime and its supposed military threat to South Korea, Japan and even the United States. Pyongyang's ability to test fire a three-stage missile that according to defence analysts may or may not be able to reach the continental North America, hardly makes it a serious military threat to the US, which has thousands of intercontinental ballistic missiles with multiple nuclear warheads each capable of precision

targeting. Or even to Japan whose military, although relatively small, is equipped with sophisticated modern weaponry. In comparison, North Korea's oversized military is antiquated, and lacking in essential supplies of spare parts, fuel and food.

If North Korea is being considered in Washington, Tokyo and elsewhere as the next Iraq or Yugoslavia, it is because of its key strategic position in Asia—right at the juncture of three major powers, Japan, China and Russia. Just as the Balkans, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has historically been a focus of major power rivalry, so the Korean peninsula has been vital for access to Japan, Manchuria, China and Siberia. Conflicts over control of Korea sparked the Sino-Japanese war in 1895 and the Russo-Japanese war in 1905. Having succeeded in transforming Korea into a colony by 1910, Japan used the peninsula in the 1930s as its base of operations for the seizure of Manchuria and then its war against China.

Today, the Korean peninsula retains its strategic significance. Using the threat of North Korea as a pretext, the US retains a sizeable military presence in South Korea—37,000 troops that can be quickly reinforced with naval forces and warplanes. Another 47,000 US troops are based in Japan. Moreover, the US has been able to use the tensions with North Korea as a means of applying pressure not only to China and Russia, but also to its economic rival, Japan.

The Clinton administration seized on North Korea's first ballistic missile test last August to involve a previously reluctant Japanese government in its plans for a new “Star Wars” type anti-missile umbrella covering north-east Asia. This week the US and Japan are on the verge of signing a formal agreement for the joint development of a ballistic missile with a special kinetic warhead capable of destroying an enemy missile without triggering its explosive load. The establishment of such an umbrella covering South Korea and possibly Taiwan is a threat not only to North Korea but also to China, and has led to sharp protests by Beijing.

In Japan, the threat of another North Korean missile test has been exploited by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi to press ahead with plans to extend Japanese military capabilities and to establish a parliamentary committee to examine revising Japan's so-called pacifist constitution. At present, Japan's Self-Defence Forces have 241,000 troops and a budget which, although limited to less than 1 percent of GNP, was still 5 trillion yen last year. In the past, however, Japanese governments have felt constrained by popular opposition to the military from dispatching troops overseas or purchasing equipment of an overtly offensive character, such as aircraft carriers and long-range bombers.

While still heavily reliant on the US-Japan Security Treaty, sections of the Japanese ruling class are acutely aware that Japan's economic and strategic interests are increasingly coming into conflict with those of the US. As in Europe in the wake of the bombing of Yugoslavia, strategists in Tokyo are drawing the conclusion that Japan must have its own independent military force in order to protect its own interests in the region and internationally.

Just recently, Shingo Nishimura, a sitting LDP member of parliament commented: “Japan must be like NATO countries. We must have the military power and the legal authority to act on it. We ought to have aircraft carriers, long-range missiles, long-range bombers. We should even have the atomic bomb. I'm probably in the minority here.”

So far the Obuchi government has given no public indication that it intends to rapidly adopt Nishimura's stance. But it has used the tensions over North Korea to advance plans for the development of its own network of sky satellites, and for the establishment of a fleet of its own aerial refuelling tankers to greatly extend the range of its present warplanes. Last week Japan and South Korea conducted joint naval exercises in the East China Sea between Japan's southwestern island of Kyushu and South Korea's Cheju Island evoking an angry protest from

North Korea.

At present, the US and Japan are closely coordinating their actions in relation to North Korea. But there is no doubt that each is seeking to use the situation to further advance its own plans within north-east Asia, thus creating the potential for conflict in the future over the Korean Peninsula, and more broadly over who will dominate politically and economically within the Asian Pacific region as a whole.



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