

Bush administration ratchets up tensions on the Korean peninsula

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At present international media attention is focused on the standoff between Washington and Beijing over the fate of the US spy plane grounded on Hainan Island. But just to the north, on the Korean peninsula, Bush's aggressive and ad hoc foreign policy has already forced a major cabinet reshuffle in the South and threatens to rapidly escalate tensions with the North.

While in formal terms the US administration is still conducting a review of American policy towards North Korea, Bush has already made abundantly clear that he favours a more confrontational approach to Pyongyang than Clinton. US-North Korean talks begun under Clinton have been put on hold—a move that effectively undermines the so-called Sunshine policy pursued by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung to open up economic and political relations with North Korea.

During a summit meeting in Washington in early March, Bush rebuffed appeals from Kim for the early resumption of US negotiations with Pyongyang and, in what was described as a “frank and candid” discussion, queried the worth of any deal with North Korea. In his publicly reported comments, Bush said that he had “some skepticism about the leader of North Korea” and that he doubted that arms agreements with Pyongyang could be adequately verified. Without explicitly saying so, these remarks called into question the whole basis of Kim's “Sunshine” policy.

The US had previously hauled Kim Dae Jung into line over a communiqué issued during a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to South Korea in late February. The joint statement had pointedly described the 1972 Antibalistic Missile Treaty as the “cornerstone of strategic stability”. The ABM treaty signed between the US and the former Soviet Union banned the development of anti-missile systems.

The joint statement was widely viewed as a shift by South Korea towards Russia, which, along with China and North Korea, views the Bush administration's plans for a national missile defence shield as aimed at undermining their military capacity. Under pressure from the US and with Kim Dae Jung due in Washington, South Korea rapidly backpedalled with a statement from its foreign ministry to the effect that it had not “voiced any opposition” to the US missile defence project.

Kim was reportedly deeply disappointed by the meeting with Bush. The bitterness in ruling circles in Seoul was expressed in a recent editorial entitled “A stalled peace process” in the *Korean Herald*, commenting: “We are rather concerned that Bush and his foreign policy team have been woefully inconsistent in their perceptions of North Korea and the Korean peace process. North Korea didn't emerge overnight. The North Korean issue has been around many years. So the new administration in Washington could have been much better prepared to tackle it efficiently without stumbling so much.”

Faced with the prospect of an emerging rift with Washington, however, Kim moved to shore up relations with the US last week by replacing nearly half of his cabinet, most notably his ministers for defence and foreign affairs. Both the new Foreign Minister Han Seung-soo, a former

US ambassador, and Defence Minister Kim Dong-shin, a former army chief of staff, have close ties with the US and contacts within the Republican Party. Immediately after their appointment the two new ministers issued statements confirming South Korea's determination to maintain close ties with Washington.

The replacement of the previous foreign minister Lee Jounng-binn was put down to his “gaffes” in his handling of the Putin visit. Lee's remarks demonstrate, however, that the reference in the communiqué to ABM treaty was no accidental mistake but reflected divisions within the South Korean cabinet over how to respond to the Bush administration. Following his dismissal, Lee pointedly urged the government not to bow to the US. “We cannot sacrifice and hurt our pride in our contacts with other countries. What matters is to put our national pride ahead of US-South Korea ties,” he said.

Pyongyang has already accused Bush of “escalating its campaign for confrontation” with the North in order “to strain the situation on the Korean peninsula”. An official quoted in the *Rodong Simmun* newspaper described US views on North Korea as “out of date and very displeasing”. Particularly over the last few years, the North Korean regime has been seeking to open up the economy and boost foreign investment. Last month Pyongyang sent a huge wreath of flowers and a personal message of condolence from North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to the funeral of Hyundai founder Chung Ju-yung, who had begun investing heavily in the north. Chung's visits, tourist project and plans for a huge investment zone in North Korea paved the way for last year's summit meeting between the leaders of the two Koreas.

Relations between North and South Korea have already markedly deteriorated in the month since Kim Dae Jung's visit to Washington. Pyongyang called off joint ministerial talks scheduled for March, which were to discuss, among other matters, arrangements for the proposed visit by Kim Jong-il to South Korea. Other inter-Korean projects have been stalled such as the relinking of the two railway system, and plans to send a unified table tennis team to compete in Japan have been ditched.

North Korean television this week denounced a planned military exercise between South Korea and the US as “an act of treason that goes against the spirit of the June 15 summit declaration [last year's meeting between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong-il].” North Korea's press has also targetted South Korea's new defence minister saying: “His remarks were little short of begging foreign aggressors to hold up the process of reconciliation, cooperation and reunification of the Korean nation through war moves on the Korean peninsula.”

While the new US policy towards North Korea is yet to be formally announced, Bush's remarks during his meeting with Kim Dae Jung and the initial decisions of his administration have the imprint of the Republican extreme right all over them.

Sections of the Republican Party were bitterly critical of the Clinton administration's policy towards North Korea as being “too soft.” Under Clinton, the US continued to bully Pyongyang over its “weapons of mass

destruction”—firstly over its purported nuclear arms program and then over its long-range missile program. At the same time, in the midst of the country's widespread and protracted famine, Clinton maintained the longstanding US economic blockade of North Korea hoping that the regime would either collapse or implement the economic and political reforms demanded by the US.

By bringing the Korean peninsula to the brink of war in 1994, the Clinton administration forced Pyongyang to sign a deal to replace existing nuclear power stations with light-water reactors, incapable of producing weapons grade nuclear material, and to permit inspections of its nuclear facilities. The cost of the new power plants and other measures in the “Agreed Framework” was to be borne largely by Japan and South Korea with some assistance from the US and the European Union.

When Kim Dae Jung came to power in 1998, his “Sunshine” policy, aimed at reaching a rapprochement with Pyongyang in order to open up North Korea to South Korean investors, dovetailed with the US approach. The Clinton administration cautiously began to move towards relaxing the US economic blockade and negotiating a further agreement to compel Pyongyang to dismantle its missiles and missile production facilities. All of this was repeatedly and roundly denounced by the Republican rightwing in the US as bordering on treachery. Their aim was to tighten the economic screws and step up military provocations against North Korea in order to precipitate its breakdown or complete capitulation.

Even though the message is delivered in relatively diplomatic language, the signs are unmistakable. The Bush administration is preparing to take a tough confrontational stand to North Korea, regardless of the consequences for Kim Dae Jung, South Korea or Japan, its other formal ally in the North East Asia. Portraying Pyongyang has a “rogue state” armed to the teeth with “weapons of mass destruction” is not only the rationale for the US to develop and deploy a missile defence system but enables Washington to keep up the pressure on Beijing, which has been one of North Korea's few sponsors. It also provides a justification for maintaining 37,000 US troops in South Korea and thousands more in US military bases in Japan.

Even though it is still formally reviewing its position, the US has raised doubts about the wisdom of Kim Dae Jung's proposal for a formal peace treaty between North and South Korea—one was never signed following the end of the Korean War in 1953. Washington has also criticised plans by South Korea to provide electricity to North Korea even though the new nuclear power stations will not be completed until the end of 2003 and construction is not scheduled to begin until late next year.

At the end of March, the commander of US forces in Korea, General Thomas Schwartz, appeared before the US Senate and attempted to justify the maintenance of US troops on the peninsula by painting North Korea, a country of around 20 million people as a serious military threat to US interests. “When I look north I see an enemy that's bigger, better, closer and deadlier, and I can prove it,” he said. The “proof” was that North Korea had the “world's largest artillery force—for a small nation” and carried out training and other unspecified actions that “suggested” its military was buying equipment.

The Bush administration's emerging strategy towards North Korea has provoked sharp opposition in the US ruling circles as well as Asia and Europe. On March 22, a taskforce on Korea established by the Council of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to Bush calling on the president not to abruptly change previous policies which “have prevented a second war on the peninsula and may have persuaded North Korea that it has no better options than diplomacy. If Pyongyang is indeed ready to take further steps towards strengthening peace on the peninsula, then the United States should be full prepared to respond.”

An editorial in the *Boston Globe* on March 29 entitled “Bush's Korean blunder” was more pointed in its criticisms. “[I]t would be the height of folly to reject negotiations with North Korea either because of abstract

worries about verification or because of a determination to plunge ahead with the development of a missile defence system that will remain an unattainable technological ambition for years to come.” Urging Bush to resume dialogue with North Korea and to support Kim Dae Jung's focus on reconciliation, the editorial continued: “These are lucid, tough-minded prescriptions that a president who is not in thrall to doctrinaire right-wingers ought to adopt.”

A comment in the *LA Times* on March 27 branded Bush's meeting with Kim as “a diplomatic train wreck,” saying it had “injected dangerous confusion into a relationship that both countries regard as crucial.” The article went on to insist that North Korea's collapse would be disaster. “West Germany's absorption of East Germany after 1990 is still far from complete, and it has been hugely expensive. But West Germany was much richer and much bigger by comparison to the East than South Korea is to the North. For the South to quickly absorb the North would condemn both to poverty.”

On the other side of the Atlantic, an editorial on March 29 in the British-based *Financial Times* expressed the concerns in ruling circles in Europe over US policy towards North Korea as well as China and Russia. It stated: “President's George W. Bush wants to start his foreign policy with a clean slate. Republicans have vowed to replace Bill Clinton's instinctive interventionism with hard-nosed self-interest, their realism overriding his romanticism. America's allies and adversaries alike are bracing themselves for a tougher, more unilateralist approach...”

“The worry is that the Bush administration might be tempted to take major foreign policy decisions in many areas without having devised a proper strategy. The administration is poised to press ahead with the sale of destroyers with advanced radar to Taiwan, a move that China would see as a dangerous provocation. President Bush has devised no alternative to negotiations to curb North Korea's production and sale of ballistic missiles. And the administration has thought little about relations with Russia, beyond ending what it saw as Mr Clinton's indulgence towards the Kremlin.”

The European Union, which is increasingly at odds with the US on a number of issues, announced on March 25 that it was sending its own team of mediators headed by Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson to hold discussions in North and South Korea. “The aim is to express support for the process started by Kim Dae Jung, a process aimed at bringing to an end one of the last conflicts with origins in the Second World War.”

Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh said that Europe had to step in as “it's becoming clear that the new US administration wants to take a more hard-line approach towards North Korea.” Germany reached an accord with North Korea earlier in March to provide access for its diplomats, journalists and relief workers and to begin discussions on arms proliferation. Other countries including Britain, Australia and New Zealand are in the process of making diplomatic arrangements.

The European push into North East Asia is not for altruistic motives. As well as fears about the potentially destabilising impact of a reckless and confrontationalist policy by Bush, the Europeans powers are seeking to make economic inroads into the region. Major companies like Siemens AG of Germany and Asea Brown Boveri of Switzerland have begun feeling out business prospects in North Korea.

Investors are being drawn to North Korea not simply because of the country's large reservoir of cheap labour. There is also interest in the broader possibilities opened up the country's strategic position adjoining Russia, China and Japan. The opening up of North Korea raises the potential for transport links from Japan along the Korean peninsula to China and through to Europe as well as pipelines to Japan from the substantial Central Asian oil and gas reserves. Some of these possibilities have already been mooted but are now placed under threat if Kim Dae Jung's “Sunshine” policy collapses and there is a return to a political and military standoff on the peninsula.

The Bush administration's confrontationist policy towards North Korea not only threatens to produce frictions on the Korean peninsula but to become another exacerbating factor in what are increasingly strained relations between the US and the European powers.



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