

US steps up pressure on North Korea

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Before the war on Afghanistan is even over, the Bush administration is already naming other potential targets for American aggression. While the most publicised have been Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, the past weeks have also seen veiled threats against North Korea.

Following September 11, North Korea made overtures that were clearly intended to bring about an improvement in its strained relations with Washington. It stridently condemned the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington and resumed diplomatic talks with South Korea, after a six-month pause. However, far from a lessening of tensions, North Korea has faced intensified political and military pressure.

The 37,000 US troops in South Korea and the South Korean military forces have been on high alert since September 11, on the grounds the North could take advantage of the political climate to attack the South. At the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum in October, Bush declared: “North Korea should not in any way think that, because we happen to be engaged in Afghanistan, we will not be ready to fulfil our end of the [defence] agreement with the South Korean government.” Tensions on the border moved up another notch this week with North and South Korean troops exchanging gunfire for the first time since 1998.

Despite the North agreeing to sign two proposed UN anti-terrorism treaties and cooperate with the US, Washington has kept it on a list of “terrorist-supporting nations”. The pretext given for the attack on the Taliban regime—that it was harbouring terrorists—is identical to one of the reasons cited by the US for listing North Korea. The Pyongyang regime is accused of providing sanctuary to several aging members of the Japanese Red Army Faction, a grouping accused of carrying out hijackings in the 1970s.

The US campaign against North Korea is now reaching a new stage. Without providing any evidence, the Bush administration is alleging that the Pyongyang government is constructing chemical and nuclear weapons. In the course of a November 26 press conference, Bush followed

an ultimatum to Iraq to allow the entry of foreign weapons inspectors, with a similar threat against North Korea. “I made it very clear to North Korea that in order for us to have relations with them that we want to know: are they developing weapons of mass destruction? And they ought to stop proliferating,” he declared.

On November 28, a joint statement by the US, Japanese and South Korean governments called on North Korea “to address the concerns of the international community” over its alleged nuclear weapons program and “to take further steps to confirm its cooperation with international anti-terrorism initiatives”.

The North Korean regime, understandably, has expressed alarm. Yesterday, it denied having “weapons of mass destruction” and warned against the “hostile US policy”. In a statement by its central news agency, Pyongyang said: “All circumstances show that the prospect of resolving problems through a dialogue with the United States have in fact become remote. Under these circumstances, we can no longer sit idle, and we will be compelled to take proper countermeasures.”

Since coming to office, the Bush administration has consistently taken an aggressive stance toward North Korea. In January, the Republicans suspended talks over establishing diplomatic relations, which were initiated last year by the previous Clinton administration. In retaliation, North Korea suspended the political exchanges and economic projects with South Korea agreed at last year’s inter-Korea summit, when South Korean President Kim Dae-jung travelled to Pyongyang for talks with the North’s leader Kim Jong-Il.

While the Bush administration declared in June it was prepared to resume talks, it imposed harsher conditions than Clinton. Bush spokesmen made clear Pyongyang would be expected to accept the indefinite presence of American troops in South Korea, while at the same time reducing the size of its own conventional military forces and permanently halting a suspended long-range missile program, which had been North Korea’s major export earner.

Underlying Bush's policy is a determination within sections of the US ruling class to assert US geo-political dominance over the strategic Korean peninsula and block the emergence of China as a rival regional power in East Asia. Throughout the 1990s, the Republican right agitated for the US to exploit North Korea's catastrophic economic decline, triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union, to bring about the downfall of the Stalinist state and replace it with a pro-US regime.

In 1994, under pressure from a Republican-dominated Congress, the Clinton administration took the US to the brink of a war with North Korea over allegations that it was attempting to manufacture nuclear weapons with fuel from its Soviet-era nuclear reactors. In 1998, Clinton again threatened North Korea with military strikes over allegations that its long-range missiles could threaten the US.

Each time North Korea, under pressure from China, bowed to the US and reached a settlement, only to find itself faced with new more provocative US demands. In the US, however, the Republican right loudly denounced the Clinton administration for appeasing North Korea and called for tougher measures. Now the Republicans hold power and are ratcheting up the pressure on Pyongyang with the intent of provoking another confrontation.

In South Korea, the US position, combined with the North's reaction to it, has resulted in a marked shift away from Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy". Inaugurated in 1998, Kim sought to bring about a political settlement with the North that benefited the South economically. With South Korean industry aspiring to take advantage of the North's low-cost, regimented labour force, natural resources and geographic location, Kim offered assistance to Pyongyang in exchange for opening up to investment.

As tensions escalated in the course of the year, the rightwing opponents of the Sunshine Policy have gained the upper hand in South Korea's political establishment. The conservative Grand National Party (GNP)—the instrument of the former US-backed military dictatorship—has continually accused Kim Dae-jung's cabinet of undermining the country's security. In September, Kim lost his parliamentary majority when the small United Liberal Party abandoned the ruling coalition and joined with the GNP.

Since then, Kim Dae-jung has tailored his policies to suit the GNP and the Bush administration. In response to opposition party attacks that it has given too much to the North for no return, the South Korean government is now considering imposing "barter" terms on the provision of

food aid, with Pyongyang obligated to pay for rice with seafood or minerals. The government is also considering a GNP demand that it reject pleas for financial assistance from the South Korean operators of the loss-making tourist resort at Mount Kumgang in North Korea.

A planned special economic zone in the northern city of Kaesong appears unlikely to get off the ground in the near future and work has stopped on reconnecting a north-south rail-line. The political climate has led major South Korean companies with operations in the North, such as Samsung and Hanwha, to announce they are curtailing their investments.

The increased isolation of North Korea comes amid new UN reports of a social catastrophe gripping the country after 10 years of economic decline and a series of natural disasters. World Health Organisation representative Eigil Sorenson told a press conference on November 27: "The health care system has more or less collapsed." He recounted inspecting hospitals that lacked electricity, running water and the most basic medicines. The population is facing widespread malnutrition and epidemics of tuberculosis and malaria, with one in three now totally dependent upon foreign assistance for survival. According to the World Food Program, over four million children are malnourished and without massive new food aid, many will die.

Whether or not the Bush administration resorts to direct military aggression, its approach is the same as that advocated by the Republican right in the 1990s—isolate North Korea and, whatever the cost in human life, step up the political pressure to bring about its economic and political collapse.



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