

Bush's "evil axis" speech destabilises the Korean peninsula

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The threat of US military action against North Korea implicit in George Bush's State of the Union address has cast a pall over the South Korean government's "sunshine policy" of rapprochement with Pyongyang and revived fears of another conflagration on the Korean peninsula. Along with Iran and Iraq, the US president labelled North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" that would be targetted as part of his "global war on terrorism".

Just 18 months ago, it appeared that decades of such hostility were coming to an end. A political detente was well underway between North and South Korea, following an inter-Korea summit in June 2000, and work had begun on joint economic projects. Subsequently, 10 European Union nations, including Italy, Germany and Britain, had restored diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, as had Australia and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) states.

But the prospects dramatically cooled after Bush's installation last year. His administration withdrew the tentative support for the "sunshine policy" given by the previous Clinton White House, suspended talks with Pyongyang, raised unacceptable demands on the North that it reduce the size of its conventional military forces and accused it, without evidence, of developing nuclear and biological weapons.

Now, after months of provocation, Bush has openly set a course for conflict. The North Korean regime has responded by labelling the State of the Union speech as "little short of a declaration of war" and warned it is undertaking the necessary defensive preparations. A heightened state of alert exists on both sides of the Korean border, with half a million heavily armed North Korean troops facing an equal number of South Korean and American forces.

The immediate consequence of Bush's speech has been to plunge South Korea into political turmoil. Opposition has emerged across the political spectrum over the danger of war. President Kim Dae-jung, author of the "sunshine policy", warned on February 5: "We must think of the monstrous damage that a war on the Korean peninsula would cause."

Among millions of Korean people, the memories and impact of the 1950-53 Korean War have not faded. More than four million Koreans lost their lives and millions more were maimed or lost everything they owned. The peninsula was laid waste and took decades to recover. Today, millions of South Koreans live within artillery range of North Korea.

Student associations, trade unions and religious groups are

preparing anti-US and pro-peace demonstrations to coincide with Bush's upcoming February 19 visit to Seoul. An opinion poll on February 11 found more than 56 percent of South Koreans believe Bush's speech to be "inappropriate", while 70 percent believed the US should hold talks with the North. Only 15 percent voiced support for a policy of military pressure on Pyongyang.

The extent of the opposition is best gauged by the bitter divisions that have emerged within the right-wing opposition Grand National Party (GNP), which has close ties to the past US-backed military dictatorships in South Korea. Until now, the GNP has aligned itself with the US administration's criticisms of the "sunshine policy". While its leader initially expressed agreement with Bush's speech, other GNP legislators have virulently denounced it. One declared at a February 3 press conference: "A country [the US] trying to ignite a war on the peninsula, for any reason, cannot be our ally." A GNP official told the *Korea Times*: "We cannot recklessly lend full support to Bush's position, in light of the escalating anti-American sentiment."

A grouping of both government and GNP legislators went as far as submitting a resolution to the parliament on February 7 calling on Kim Dae-jung to demand the US support the "sunshine policy". According to the *Korea Times*, the resolution argued: "The biggest threat to US national security is not sophisticated missiles, but the anti-US sentiment stemming from its hegemonic attitude toward weak countries, its Middle East policy in favour of Israel and its hardline policy toward the North."

Bush's stance toward North Korea has also provoked criticisms internationally. Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi bluntly stated on February 6 that his government would not change its policy toward North Korea and would "work patiently to make progress in talks on normalising diplomatic ties". European governments have made clear their continued support for the "sunshine policy". Russia and China both officially disagreed with the term "axis of evil".

The accusation that North Korea is a sponsor of global terrorism or a threat to the US flies in the face of reality. North Korea had no involvement in the September 11 attack. It is a backward, famine-stricken and impoverished state, with a population of just 24 million and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of little more than \$US10 billion. Much of its military's obsolete Soviet-era equipment is dysfunctional due to lack of fuel, spare parts and maintenance.

Far from "threatening the world", Pyongyang has repeatedly

sought to appease the US and South Korea since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, its main Cold War sponsor. In 1994, it closed down its nuclear reactors after the threat of military strikes by the Clinton administration. International teams that inspected the sites found no evidence that North Korea possessed either nuclear or biological weapons. In 1998, also following US threats, North Korea suspended its long-range missile program and has not resumed it.

In his speech, Bush cynically accused North Korea of “arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens”. Firstly, both Koreas maintain a huge military following a war that has never officially ended. In the case of South Korea, it is backed by the might of the US war machine, including the presence of 37,000 US troops. Secondly, for Pyongyang, the development and sale of missiles and other armaments is one of its few means of earning foreign currency. The US has directly contributed to the economic chaos in North Korea, and thus to the country’s poverty and famine, by maintaining a strict economic blockade dating back to the Korean War.

Bush’s targeting of North Korea is bound up with major power rivalry in North East Asia. North Korea’s concessions to Washington were not only the product of US threats and pressure. Pyongyang has been encouraged by both South Korea and China to seek a rapprochement in order to open up the peninsula to foreign investment and as a land route for trade and energy to East Asia.

Sections of big business in both Asia and Europe regard the Korean peninsula as a key to Eurasian economic integration. Work began last year on linking Russia’s trans-Siberian railway from Europe to both China and South Korea’s ports. The move has the potential to cut container transport time between the EU and East Asia by more than 10 days. Feasibility studies have been conducted for gas pipelines from Russia through China and the North for use in South Korea and export to Japan. Special economic zones are planned in North Korea and also China’s depressed northern provinces, offering export companies a continuous supply of low-cost, politically repressed labour near the Japanese market and with fast land transport routes to Europe.

It is precisely the possibility that the “sunshine policy” could be successful that is animating the hardline stance of the US administration. Bush’s prime target is not so much North Korea but China, which rightwing Republicans regard as the main threat to US economic and military dominance in the region. Throughout the US presidential election campaign, Bush referred to China as “a strategic competitor”.

The realisation of the “sunshine policy” would remove a major justification for the large US troop presence in South Korea and Japan—defending them against the North Korean threat. At the same time it would economically strengthen a regime with close relations to Beijing. It would inevitably, and most likely rapidly, draw South Korea, Russia and Japan into closer economic and security ties with China, as well as encouraging a greater European interest in the region.

Against this perspective, Bush is advancing the consistent policy of the Republican rightwing, which throughout the 1990s advocated the complete isolation of North Korea through

economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure and military threats. The stated aim has been to precipitate the political and social disintegration of the country, regardless of the consequences for the Korean people. Such a scenario would disrupt the economic development of China, as well as position the US to increase military pressure against it.

The same layers of the US administration who are pushing for aggressive action against North Korea are also the most virulent exponents of a confrontational policy against Beijing, including the recognition of Taiwan as a separate state. Among them is Bush’s Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who in the 1990s opposed any dispatch of international food aid to North Korea, on the grounds that it would assist the Pyongyang regime survive.

As was revealed several years ago, the Pentagon has already drawn up plans for a “pre-emptive” invasion of North Korea to overthrow the government and move troops to the Chinese border. In November 1998, Richard Halloran, former military correspondent for the *New York Times* and director of the Center of War, Peace and News Media, published a detailed account.

According to Halloran, the American military has target lists of North Korean military positions, underground bunkers and government facilities. An unnamed senior US official told him at the time: “When we’re done, they will not be able to mount any military activity of any kind. We will kill them all.”

The plan assumes that the South Korean ruling elites would be prepared to sacrifice their economic interests, send hundreds of thousands of troops over the border and bear the cost of permanently occupying the North; that US air power would so completely destroy the North’s military it could not launch a counter-attack; that Japan would participate and allow bases on its soil to be used for the air strikes; and that China, Russia and the EU would not intervene.

There is no doubt that this particular piece of military madness, along with others, is now up for review and discussion in the White House and the Pentagon.



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