

War danger grows on Korean peninsula

James Conachy
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Tensions between the US and North Korea are at their worst since 1994, when the Clinton administration threatened military strikes if Pyongyang did not shut down its nuclear power plants. On January 29, Bush included North Korea in his “axis of evil” and made further accusations during his February East Asia visit that it possessed “weapons of mass destruction”. This month, in response to the leaked Pentagon report proposing the use of nuclear weapons in a war on the Korean peninsula, North Korea issued threats of its own.

The most serious was a thinly-veiled warning that Pyongyang may, in self-defence, abandon the weapons control agreements it entered into in 1994 and 1998. The North Korean foreign ministry declared on March 13: “Under the present situation where nuclear lunatics have taken office in the White House, we are compelled to examine all agreements with the US. In case the US plan turns out to be true, the DPKR [North Korea] will have no choice but to take a substantial counter-measure against it, not bound to any DPKR-US agreement.”

In 1994, facing the threat of US attack, the Pyongyang regime agreed to close its reactors, which were capable of producing plutonium, in exchange for the US, Japan and South Korea financing the construction of light-water nuclear plants and supplying the North with alternative fuel in the interim. In late 1998, again under military pressure, the North agreed to suspend testing a long-range missile allegedly able to reach the US west coast.

Despite this record of submission to Washington’s demands, the Bush White House is insisting that North Korea, an economically crippled nation of just 23 million people, remains one the greatest military challenges to the US. While it has made a verbal gesture of being prepared to enter into talks, the Bush administration has stressed it will demand Pyongyang reduce the size of its conventional armed forces and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to enter its military and research facilities.

The US demands are an open provocation. While the Pyongyang regime is being told to unilaterally disarm, Washington threatens it with nuclear weapons, has 37,000 troops permanently stationed in the South and supplies the South Korean military with state-of-the-art hardware. On March 21, the largest military exercise ever held on the peninsula began, involving over 50,000 US troops, including some based in Japan, and most of the 650,000-strong South Korean armed forces. The exercise’s scenario is a war with the North. Pyongyang has labeled it a rehearsal for a “nuclear holocaust”.

The Bush administration’s aim is to push the North into taking defensive measures, which can then be presented as evidence of assembling “weapons of mass destruction” and used as the pretext for military strikes. The groundwork for this has been laid already. On March 19, the White House, in response to the North’s reaction to the Pentagon report, announced it could no longer certify to the US Congress that Pyongyang was abiding by the 1994 agreement.

In glaring contrast, an official involved in monitoring the agreement

told the *Washington Post*: “As far as we can see, it has been fulfilled. We challenge anybody who wants to make us believe that the North Koreans didn’t stick to the bargain.” The commander of American forces in South Korea, General Thomas Schwartz, testified to the US Senate earlier this month that North Korea had honoured the 1998 missile agreement and said there were “no indicators” Pyongyang was participating in “any kind” of terrorist activity.

Driving Bush’s Korea policy is unstated opposition to the South Korean government’s “sunshine policy”—a series of steps toward a political settlement with the North over the past three years, a process encouraged by China in particular.

South Korea’s rapprochement with the North seeks to enable far greater economic exploitation of the markets and resources of both China and the former territories of the Soviet Union. Transport routes from the South, through the North and China to Russia’s trans-Siberian railway, could transform it into a significant trade hub between north-east Asia and the European Union (EU). Russia has made major investments to upgrade the rail line, which could move freight across Eurasia at least 10 days faster than by sea. Oil and gas piped from Central Asia and Russia to China and South Korea could be profitably exported on to Japan, one of the world’s biggest importers of energy.

As a London *Financial Times* correspondent noted on March 18: “Seoul believes that its location, sandwiched between Japan, the world’s second largest economy, and China, the world’s fastest growing economy, gives it a pivotal position in north-east Asia ... at the heart of a region of 1.5 billion people, which already produces 20 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product and is forecast to challenge the dominance of North America and Europe in future.” More generally, some in Asian and European ruling circles are actively seeking to develop economic integration across the Eurasian landmass in order to decrease the global weight of their US rivals.

China, due to both its geographical position and its growing ability to project military and political power in East Asia, is the key to such ambitions. Representing the most belligerent sections of the American ruling elite, the Bush administration is determined to prevent any possibility that the development of China could bring about such a dramatic realignment in international relations. It will not willingly accept any changes on the Korean peninsula, or elsewhere in Asia, that lessens the hegemonic position the US has held in the region since World War II.

Bush’s policy is to replace the current North Korean regime with a pro-US puppet state, using either political coercion to bring about its collapse or, if necessary, bombing it out of existence. As well as disrupting Beijing’s economic ambitions, Pyongyang’s fall would intensify the political and military pressure being applied to China by the White House. Bush’s declaration that Beijing was a “strategic competitor” sums up the stance of the Republican rightwing, among

whom there is serious discussion about launching a war against China before it is capable of militarily resisting the US or consolidates alliances with other regional powers.

The only major power currently lending support to Bush's rhetoric against North Korea is Japan. Beset by economic crisis, the unstable government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is seeking to use the "war on terrorism" and the alleged threat from North Korea to divert social tensions and justify the build-up and use of Japan's armed forces. With the backing of sections of the media, he is working in tandem with Washington to create a climate for military strikes against Pyongyang. On March 12, a wife of a Japanese "Red Army" terrorist conveniently confessed that she assisted North Korean agents kidnap a Japanese woman in 1983. The rightwing *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorialised the following day that, combined with alleged intrusions by North Korean spy ships into Japanese waters, the kidnapping charges proved "North Korea is a state that supports terrorism".

Elsewhere, the bellicose stance of the Bush administration has provoked open opposition. In South Korea, the economic interests of major sections of the corporate elite are being disrupted and there are fears of a catastrophic war devastating the peninsula. While the South Korean ruling class has depended upon US support since the establishment of the state in 1948, a groundswell of anti-American sentiment is developing within ruling circles and among broader sections of the population. Even the opposition Grand National Party, the most pro-US faction of the political establishment, demanded an official government protest over Bush's nuclear posture review.

Lim Dong-won, the former Unification Minister and still an adviser to President Kim Dae-jung, bluntly stated on March 18 that the two Koreas had to push ahead with the "sunshine policy", regardless of the US, or face a military crisis within a year. Before an audience of students at Seoul's National University, Lim warned: "If military action is taken to disable the North's 'weapons of mass destruction', it will most likely escalate into an all-out war."

Pointing to the limited options before the North Korean regime, Lim also raised the possibility of Pyongyang ordering an "all-or-nothing suicide attack" to drive the American military out of South Korea. Numerous commentators and organisations have invoked the memory of the four million Koreans who died in the 1950-53 Korean War.

Kim Dae-jung's government has attempted to straddle the position of the Bush administration by downplaying the dangers of another war and stating its commitment to both its US military alliance and the "sunshine policy". On March 25, the South announced that it had reached an agreement with the North for Lim Dong-won to travel to Pyongyang in the first week of April, for the highest level inter-Korea talks since last year.

There are growing calls for open defiance of Washington, though. One columnist for the newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo* declared in a March 14 opinion piece: "Seoul must speak up. The National Assembly should protest, but the government is mute; politicians are trapped by scandals, elections and party in-fighting. No-one is paying attention to the looming shadow of nuclear war here...."

"North Korea and Iraq have treated Washington delicately and signalled their interest in dialogue. The Bush administration, however, wants to rule the 'axis of evil' with its nuclear axis, a policy that is counterproductive. Shrugging our shoulders and saying there is nothing we can do about US nuclear strategy is neglect of duty and defeatism. We must defy any nuclear strategy that would bring destruction to the peninsula."

The calls in South Korea for the continuation of the "sunshine

policy" are drawing support from China and the EU. Both have made efforts to prevent the Bush administration disrupting the détente between the two Koreas, from which they hope to reap considerable political and economic gains.

In mid-March, China dispatched a senior diplomat to South Korea and hosted a visit to Beijing by North Korean vice foreign minister Kim Yong Il to urge the two Koreas to resume talks on economic cooperation.

From March 4 to 18, the EU hosted a two-week, four-nation European tour by senior North Korean officials. To mark the occasion, the EU executive released a strategy paper on the Korean peninsula emphasising its aim to open up the North to foreign investment and its support for a South-North détente.

An agreement was reached for the EU Chamber of Commerce in Korea (EUCCK) to take part in the Pyongyang International Trade Fair, as well as delegations from Britain, Germany, France and Italy. EUCCK has also been invited to attend the first Pyongyang Technology Exhibition in September, aimed at providing, according to the *Korea Herald*, "a platform for European companies to enter a market that is difficult to access but at the same time offers most viable business prospects". An EUCCK press release declared: "As North Korea is moving to join the ranks of successful developing nations, it is adapting to a new international environment."

In response to questions on the gulf between the US and EU over North Korea, EU external relations commission spokesman Gunnar Wiegand told the media: "We have different approaches, but for us this is just the implementation of a policy that has existed for some time." In perhaps the clearest repudiation of Bush, the British Foreign Office announced on March 16 that it was sending an ambassador to North Korea for the first time since it broke diplomatic relations at the beginning of the Korean War.

Any US move toward direct confrontation with North Korea can only heighten the political and economic tensions. Bush is sowing the seeds not only for conflict on the Korean peninsula but also with China and the European Union.



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