Why the US plans to bomb Iraq and not North Korea

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The US response last week to North Korea's admission that it has maintained a secret nuclear weapons program exposes the complete hypocrisy of the Bush administration's plans for war against Iraq. If one were to accept the basic premises of Washington's stated foreign policy as good coin then there is simply no credible explanation for its decision to seek to disarm Pyongyang with "diplomacy" while proposing to use precision-guided munitions for the same purpose against Baghdad.

For months US officials have been arguing that Saddam Hussein must be ousted militarily on the basis of unsubstantiated claims that Iraq is covertly developing "weapons of mass destruction," including nuclear, biological and chemical arms. Lacking any concrete evidence, the Bush administration has sought to justify its war plans on the basis that Iraq may, in the future, be able to build a nuclear bomb and might provide "weapons of mass destruction" to terrorist organisations.

Last week, however, Washington announced that, during talks between North Korean and US officials on October 3-5, Pyongyang had openly admitted to building a secret uranium enrichment facility. The program is in direct violation of a deal signed between the two countries in 1994, under which North Korea agreed to end its nuclear program and mothball its existing reactors in return for supplies of heavy fuel oil and the building of two modern light water power reactors incapable of producing weapons grade material.

Based on the logic of Washington's "war on terrorism," the expected response would be strident denunciations, the demonisation of Kim Jong Il as the Saddam Hussein of Asia and threats of military action to disarm North Korea. Here, after all, was a country, which, along with Iraq and Iran, has been branded by Bush as part of the "axis of evil," declaring that it had a program to produce fissile material and, according to one US official present, that it had "more powerful things as well".

Yet, the reaction in Washington has been decidedly low key. Bush is yet to make a public statement on the issue. US officials have emphasised that non-military means would be used to pressure Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear program. Presidential spokesman Scott McClellan said Bush intends to "seek a peaceful solution" through diplomacy. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher indicated that the US would keep open the possibility of future talks with North Korea, saying: "It's not a show-stopper."

James Kelly, assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs, who led a delegation to Pyongyang in early October, has been dispatched to Beijing and Seoul to garner support for diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea. The Bush administration has announced that it will withdraw from the 1994 agreement, effectively ending oil shipments and other assistance to North Korea—a country that is already teetering on the brink of economic collapse and widespread famine.

Washington's hypocritical stance in preparing for war against Iraq while announcing diplomatic measures to isolate North Korea simply underscores the fact that there is no justification for US aggression, in any form, against either country. Like Iraq, North Korea is a small, economically backward nation of some 20 million people and is in no position to militarily threaten the US, which maintains 37,000 troops in South Korea, large military bases in Japan and patrols North East Asia with nuclear-armed ships and submarines.

On the contrary, Pyongyang has every reason to believe that it is under threat from Washington and every right to arm itself against a potential attack. Key figures in the Bush administration, such as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, berated President Clinton throughout the 1990s for his soft stance on North Korea, arguing that the Pyongyang regime had to be isolated and brought down. On coming to office, Bush ordered a review of US policy and has steadily increased the pressure on the country.

The glaring contradiction between its stance over Iraq and North Korea has forced the Bush administration into some extraordinary logical contortions to justify its attitude.

Based on a CIA assessment, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said he believed that North Korea had "one or two" nuclear bombs as well as its weapons program. But he immediately went on to declare that Iraq, which has no proven nuclear weapons capability, remained the most significant threat to the US. "Iraq has unique characteristics that distinguish it and that suggest that it has nominated itself ... for special attention because of the threat of what they're doing," he said. What those characteristics were, however, he did not

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say.

According to the *New York Times*, other administration officials were arguing exactly the opposite case—because Iraq poses less of a military threat, it should be the one attacked. As the newspaper reported: "In deciding on a very measured response the White House recognised the reality of how North Korea differs from Iraq. It may already have nuclear weapons and it has a huge army and conventional weapons capable of wreaking havoc on South Korea."

A similar rationale was offered by Deputy Secretary of State Armitage who told the media: "Here's a case in North Korea where weapons have proliferated and put at risk our interests and the interests of two of our great allies. It might make our case more strong in Iraq." In other words, if Armitage is to be believed, the US intends to ignore what it regards as an immediate risk to its interests to attack a country that might become a threat in the future.

The absurdity of all of these arguments becomes apparent if one considers what the reaction would be in Washington to a declaration in Baghdad that it had been running a secret nuclear weapons program. The answer is obvious. The Bush administration, which has been desperately searching for a pretext for military action, would immediately seize on the statement to press ahead with its plans.

The one obvious feature that distinguishes the two countries is not publicly discussed at all—either by the Bush administration or in the US media. Unlike North Korea, which has very little in the way of strategic natural resources, Iraq has the second largest proven oil reserves in the world, making it a central element of Washington's top priority—to dominate the energy resources of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The cynicism of the Bush administration's attitude is further underscored by the fact that it has suppressed evidence of North Korea's nuclear program for months to suit its political agenda. Just weeks before the talks in Pyongyang, Bush appeared before the UN General Assembly on September 12 to demand it rubberstamp a war against Iraq to end the threat posed by its "weapons of mass destruction". Moreover, Washington said nothing about North Korea's admission for nearly a fortnight so as not to undercut its campaign for military action against Baghdad—in particular, keeping the Democrats in the dark as it sought Congressional approval for the war.

The international press has devoted considerable space to imputing Machiavellian motives to North Korea's decision to admit to a nuclear program. The *World Socialist Web Site* gives no political support to the repressive Stalinist regime of Kim Jong Il whose program of national autarchy has nothing to do with socialism. Over the last decade, Pyongyang has bent over backwards to appease the US and other major powers, offering to open up the country as a source of cheap labour and agreeing to one demand after another from Washington—while, at the same time, it now appears, maintaining weapons programs in breach of its own deals.

That said, the reasons for North Korea's latest declaration are not hard to fathom. Simply put, Washington has backed Pyongyang into a corner. When presented with US evidence that it had a uranium enrichment program in breach of international agreements, North Korea had few options. Its attempts at appeasing the US had come to naught. As in the case of Iraq, every attempt to resolve outstanding issues has led to a new set of demands. So, when confronted with US intelligence, why not admit the program and attempt to use it as a bargaining chip?

The exasperation of the North Korean bureaucracy was evident even in the comments reported by US officials. According to one US source, Pyongyang's chief negotiator—deputy foreign minister Kang Sok Joo—declared at one point: "something to the effect of, 'your president called us a member of the axis of evil ... your troops are deployed on the Korean peninsula ... of course we have a nuclear program'". Following the meeting, North Korea described Washington's attitude to the talks as "a hard-line policy of hostility" which sought to "bring North Korea to its knees by force and high-handed practices".

In the final analysis, Washington's decision to adopt a diplomatic approach, initially at least, to Pyongyang is based on tactical considerations and could rapidly change. While North Korea does not have oil or abundant natural resources, it is located in a key strategic position in North East Asia where the US is also seeking to assert its influence. As in the case of Iraq, any change in Washington's priorities towards Pyongyang will be bound up with furthering its strategic and economic interests in the region.

Sections of the US ruling elite are already pressing for tougher measures against North Korea. While stopping short of calling for war, the *Wall Street Journal* called on the Bush administration to seize upon the chance to cut off foreign aid, isolate the country and engineer its collapse.

"In the end, the only sure nonproliferation policy toward regimes like North Korea's is to change the government. We've tried appeasement for a decade and all it's accomplished is to give the dictatorship more time to build a bomb. Now's the opportunity to get serious," the newspaper declared. And if economic pressure fails to bring about a regime-change in Pyongyang, then, as in Iraq, the obvious conclusion is that military means should be used.

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