

US uses nuclear revelations to raise tensions on Korean peninsula

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Less than a fortnight ago, the Bush administration announced that North Korea had admitted, during bilateral talks in early October, to having established a uranium enrichment program in breach of international agreements. In the midst of preparations to invade Iraq for allegedly possessing “weapons of mass destruction,” the US response to Pyongyang’s confession has been decidedly muted. Bush officials announced that diplomatic, rather than military, means will be used to pressure North Korea to abandon the project.

There is no reason to believe, however, that Washington’s current low key approach is any more than tactical and temporary. Since coming to office last year, the Bush administration has ignored overtures from Pyongyang for dialogue and ratcheted up the pressure on the Stalinist regime. Earlier this year, Bush branded North Korea as part of the “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and Iran, thereby signifying that it was regarded as irredeemable and a target for future military action.

Washington has carefully chosen its time to make North Korea’s nuclear program an issue. According to the *Washington Post*, the US had known about the project for up to two years but held back from making it public. A senior South Korean official told the newspaper that Washington had information about the program well before the northern summer and that in several East Asian countries “the intelligence community followed it very closely”.

Whether North Korea confirmed the US intelligence or not, the revelation that it was capable of producing weapons-grade uranium was guaranteed to produce a nuclear scare in South Korea and Japan, and raise tensions in the region. The timing of the Bush administration’s decision to confront North Korea is bound up with a number of political considerations—both inside the US and internationally.

One of the immediate aims of the nuclear revelations was to cut across recent attempts by the Japanese government of Junichiro Koizumi to open up relations with North Korea. According to a recent article in the Japanese business newspaper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, the US informed Koizumi of the uranium enrichment program prior to his visit to Pyongyang last month. When that failed to deter the Japanese prime minister, the Bush administration took the unusual step of contacting his rival within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, former prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, to warn against moves to normalise relations.

Details of North Korea’s uranium enrichment program were made public after Koizumi ignored the US message, went ahead with the visit and signed a memorandum of understanding with Pyongyang. The purpose was to bluntly remind Tokyo—along with Seoul, Beijing and the European powers—that Washington intends to dictate the terms in North East Asia and will not hesitate to use its military power to do so. The Bush administration wants to ensure there is no challenge to its strategic and economic predominance in the region—even in the form of Koizumi’s rather tentative diplomatic moves to assert a more independent role for Japan.

For well over a decade, the US used allegations about Pyongyang’s

nuclear capacity as a means of pressuring not only North Korea and its main backer, China, but also for keeping its allies, South Korea and Japan in line. Its aggressive military stance ensured that North Korea remained isolated and forced the regime to make a series of concessions. At the same time, Washington used the constant tension on the Korean peninsula to justify the continued presence of US bases in the region and to keep South Korea and Japan militarily dependent on the US.

Even so, sections of the Republican Party rightwing were highly critical of the previous Clinton administration for conceding too much to North Korea, and in doing so, allowing US rivals—Japan and Europe—to take advantage of the easing of tensions under the Sunshine Policy of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. Kim’s program, which offered economic incentives to North Korea aimed at opening it up as a source of cheap labour, was embraced by the European Union, along with China and Russia, as a means of lessening US influence in the region and opening up new and cheaper transport links from Europe to East Asia, including Japan.

Since coming to office last year, the Bush administration has maintained an increasingly belligerent stance towards North Korea. By declaring North Korea part of the “axis of evil”, Bush effectively stymied the Sunshine Policy, reinforced more militarist elements in South Korea and Japan, and laid the basis for maintaining and strengthening the US military presence. The demonising of North Korea was also a crucial element of the Bush administration’s justification for developing its Nuclear Missile Defence, aimed at neutralising the missile arsenals not simply of so-called rogue states but of any potential military rivals.

The Bush administration’s strategy toward North Korea was considered at length in an article entitled “Korea’s place in the axis” in the May/June issue of the influential US magazine *Foreign Affairs*. Associate professor Victor Cha pointed out that there was a method behind the apparent madness of the abrupt twists and turns in US policy towards Pyongyang over the last 18 months. He termed the Bush policy “hawk engagement,” and explained that it viewed talks with North Korea, not as a way of resolving outstanding issues, but rather as a means of casting the country in the worst light and gathering support from South Korea and Japan in preparation for future conflict.

Cha explains: “It [hawk engagement] acknowledges that diplomacy can be helpful, but sees the real value of engagement as a way to expose the North’s true, malevolent intentions.... Supporters of the Sunshine Policy view engagement as the best way to discern and improve the intentions of the reclusive [North Korean leader] Kim Jong Il today. Hawks, however, see engagement as the best practical way to build a coalition for punishment tomorrow.... Hawk engagement provides a way to convince allies that noncoercive strategies have already been tried—and failed.”

By tabling its evidence of Pyongyang’s nuclear capacity, the Bush administration has raised the stakes in North East Asia even further. It wants to push South Korea and Japan to take a tougher stance against North Korea, which would, in turn, compel them to rely more heavily on

US military might. At the same time, the rising tensions will inevitably undermine growing European trade and diplomatic links with Pyongyang. The new EU ambassador to Japan Bernhard Zepter described North Korea's admission as "a heavy blow" that may call into question European funding for the country's lightwater reactors.

The decision to make North Korea's uranium enrichment program public has strengthened the most hawkish elements in the US administration and wider ruling elite. In their eyes, the fact that North Korea has established a secret uranium enrichment program in breach of international agreements is a decisive argument in favour of preemptive military action against Iraq—regardless of whether there is any evidence of Baghdad having a nuclear weapons program or not—and elsewhere.

Moreover, the most rightwing layers have already been critical of the Bush administration for failing to take a sufficiently aggressive stance against North Korea. Much of their hostility has been directed against the 1994 Agreed Framework signed by Clinton, under which North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear program in return for the construction of two modern lightwater power reactors and supplies of fuel oil. As far as the rightwing is concerned, the agreement made impermissible concessions to Pyongyang and should be torn up.

The two lightwater reactors planned for North Korea have been a particular bone of contention. Originally due to be completed in early 2003, construction has been repeatedly delayed by US demands for inspections of North Korea's nuclear facilities. Work on the project only began last year and will take at least six years. Even these first steps have been vigorously opposed by the rightwing, who have argued that construction should either be abandoned completely or used to extract further concessions from Pyongyang.

As far back as May, three leading Congressional conservatives wrote to Bush calling on him to instruct US representatives to object to any concrete pours prior to North Korea agreeing to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. Their letter also called for the US Department of Energy to halt all nuclear technology transfers to North Korea under the 1994 agreement—primarily the training of technicians to operate the new facilities.

In early August, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* published an article by two members of the rightwing US thinktank, the Nonproliferation Policy Education Centre. "While planning military action against Iraq and talking tough about regime change in Iran," they complained, "the White House is failing its first test on nuclear inspections in North Korea.... The US-directed inspectors plan to pour the concrete foundations on Wednesday in spite of North Korea's stiff-arming of even the start of inspections."

Following the revelations about North Korea's nuclear program, the calls for a "regime change" in Pyongyang have become even more strident. The *Wall Street Journal* commented that the US had "to revise the now-obvious failure of its decade-long policy of appeasing nuclear blackmail". To reinforce its demand, the newspaper republished an editorial written in 1993 berating the Clinton administration for its "big carrot" approach to North Korea.

"In the end, the only certain non-proliferation policy toward nasty, closed regimes such as North Korea's is to change the government. Containment worked against the Soviet Union, while 'engagement' with Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s obviously didn't change Saddam Hussein. We fear that Mr Clinton's all-carrot diplomacy will fare no better in North Korea than a similar policy once did in Iraq," the editorial stated.

In similar vein, William Kristol and Gary Schmitt, writing in the latest issue of the rightwing *Weekly Standard*, declared Clinton's "engagement" with North Korea to be a failure. "This softheaded policy of engagement produces a world no one wants to live in. And certainly our current difficulty in confronting an armed North Korea shows precisely why dealing with Iraq and Saddam Hussein can't wait. As President Bush has

made clear over the past year, the United States has a fundamental choice to make in confronting rogue states, dictators developing weapons of mass destruction, and global terrorism: Either we act aggressively to shape the world and change regimes where necessary, or we accept living in a world in which our very existence is contingent on the whims of unstable tyrants."

Just how far these layers are prepared to go was underscored by another comment in the *Weekly Standard* in March by Jim Doran, a senior staff member with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He concluded: "Until North Korea is free, it must continually be reminded that aggressive action on its part will immediately result not in mere retaliation but in a decisive blow that will end the regime." Horan explained what he meant by "a decisive blow" in the next sentence: "The Bush administration's inclusion of North Korea as a potential target in the recent Nuclear Posture Review is an excellent step in that direction." In order words, if North Korea steps out of line, it should be obliterated with nuclear weapons.

Two issues flow from the open advocacy in US ruling circles of "regime change" in North Korea.

Firstly, from the standpoint of Pyongyang, its efforts to build nuclear weapons to defend itself are by no means irrational or paranoid. What "regime change" signifies is all too apparent in the Persian Gulf where the US is massing troops, warships and warplanes armed to the teeth with the latest weaponry to invade Iraq and oust Hussein. Presiding over an economically crippled nation of around 20 million people, the North Korean Stalinists are engaged in a desperate exercise of, on the one hand, seeking to reach a deal with Washington, while on the other, building some sort of threat to deter US military action.

Secondly, there is no doubt that further US provocations against North Korea can be expected. Revelations that North Korea has a uranium enrichment program have not yet had the desired effect in Seoul and Tokyo. Japan recently conducted talks with North Korea in Kuala Lumpur. Neither Japan nor South Korea has called for an end to talks, the abandonment of the 1994 Agreed Framework or for a more aggressive stance to isolate North Korea. Both countries are acutely aware that they could bear the brunt of any military conflict on the Korean peninsula. Following the logic of the Bush administration's policy of "hawk engagement," this means that fresh lessons will be necessary to teach its allies the virtues of a harsher line.



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