

Bush sets course for confrontation with North Korea

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The Bush administration is preparing to escalate the current standoff over North Korea's nuclear program into a full-blown confrontation, with reckless indifference to the potentially disastrous consequences for the Korean peninsula and the entire region.

According to a report in yesterday's *New York Times*, the US has drawn up "a comprehensive plan to intensify financial and political pressure on North Korea" aimed at precipitating an economic and political collapse. "Administration officials said the threat of growing isolation was the best way to force North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions and, if it refused to, to bring down the government," the article explained.

Under the strategy, euphemistically known as "tailored containment," the US intends to pressure neighbouring countries to reduce economic ties with North Korea and to push for the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions. Other key aspects include the use of the US military to intercept North Korea's missile exports in order to dry up one of the country's few sources of hard currency. "It is a lot about putting political stress and putting economic stress," one senior official told the newspaper.

While the US has cynically declared its willingness to negotiate, this "offer" is effectively an ultimatum. Bush has insisted that no talks will take place until North Korea has scrapped its nuclear program. Moreover, as Washington has repeatedly made clear, the dismantling of nuclear facilities is just one of a long list of US demands, which include North Korea ending its ballistic missile production and reducing its conventional military forces, in particular along the border with South Korea.

To date, Washington has made no direct military threat against Pyongyang. But US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld strongly implied that the Pentagon had made contingency plans when he provocatively told a press conference on December 23 that the American military was "perfectly capable" of waging a war against North Korea at the same time as invading Iraq.

Rumsfeld declared that it would be a mistake for North Korea to feel emboldened because of Washington's current focus on Iraq. "We are capable of fighting two major regional conflicts. We're capable of winning decisively in one and swiftly defeating in the case of the other. Let there be no doubt about it," he said.

The defence secretary did not directly contradict other White House officials, who have been insisting that the US has no intention of attacking North Korea. But when asked if there was "a military option on the table", he refused to rule it out. "Well, let me put it this way," he said. "One of the assignments of the [defence] department is to prepare for a whole host of contingencies."

Rumsfeld's comments triggered an angry reaction in Pyongyang. North Korea's Defence Minister Kim Il-chol denounced the US for bringing its hostile policy to "an extremely dangerous phase". He warned that his country could not remain a passive onlooker while its sovereignty and right to exist were threatened by "the US hawks who are pushing the situation on the Korean peninsula to the brink of a nuclear war."

The Bush administration, with the uncritical backing of the media, blames the crisis entirely on North Korea. Commentators habitually brand the Pyongyang regime as belligerent and irrational, speculate on the malevolent motives behind its actions and focus attention on the supposed threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and other weapons programs. Each step by North Korea to restart its nuclear facilities—the removal of seals and monitoring equipment, the movement of fuel rods and the expulsion of UN observers—is treated as proof of Pyongyang's "nuclear brinkmanship".

But this stands reality on its head. North Korea is a small, impoverished country of some 20 million people, which has been systematically isolated economically and politically by the US over decades. It confronts the world's largest imperialist power with the capacity to obliterate North Korea's major cities and military installations many times over, and an administration that has adopted a provocative stance towards Pyongyang from day one.

On assuming office, George W. Bush immediately froze the high-level negotiations conducted under Clinton. Then, after a lengthy "policy review," his administration issued a new set of demands to be addressed by Pyongyang. In his State of the Union speech in January 2002, Bush branded North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as part of an "axis of evil"—a label that, as the current US military buildup against Baghdad demonstrates, is tantamount to a declaration of war. In March, portions of the Pentagon's "Nuclear Posture Review," which were leaked to the press, revealed that the US was prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea.

Far from being "irrational", North Korea's response to Washington's threats is completely logical. According to a number of commentators, the country is incapable of fighting a sustained war. Its large conventional armed forces are starved of spare parts and fuel and dependent on an economy that is on the brink of collapse. Boxed into a corner by Washington, Pyongyang's decision to restart its nuclear program is a desperate attempt to create a nuclear threat, either real or potential, with which to keep the US at bay.

If Pyongyang is proceeding in defiance of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), it is because it has concluded that compliance with international weapons treaties is no guarantee against US military action. After all, Baghdad has complied with all the US demands elaborated in the latest UN Security Council resolution, UN inspectors have found no evidence of "weapons of mass destruction," yet the US preparations for an invasion of Iraq continue relentlessly. North Korea is entirely justified in concluding that it could well be the next target of the Bush administration's doctrine of unilateral, preemptive strikes.

The US administration attempts to justify its belligerent stance against North Korea by pointing to the regime's anti-democratic methods and the country's appalling social conditions. But its expressions of concern for the Korean people are completely hypocritical. While Bush denounces North Korean leader Kim Il-jung for "starving his people," he has no

compunction about using poverty and starvation as a weapon to bring Pyongyang to its knees. His administration has already suspended its limited food aid and is now preparing to tighten an economic noose around the country.

The Bush administration's aggressive stance towards North Korea is driven by its determination to assert US economic and strategic interests in North East Asia. By demonising North Korea, Washington can justify the large US military presence in South Korea and Japan as well as its decision to tear up the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and build a Nuclear Missile Defence.

There are also broader considerations. By provoking a crisis, the US has effectively scuttled the "sunshine policy" of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, which was aimed at opening up North Korea to investment and the Korean peninsula as a major transport route between Europe and East Asia. Those who stood to benefit most from the "sunshine policy" and the lessening of tensions were the US's main economic rivals—Europe and Japan—along with the regional powers, China and South Korea.

The *World Socialist Web Site* gives no political support to North Korea's Stalinist regime, which is a brutal and oppressive dictatorship that has nothing to do with socialism. Like its counterparts in Beijing, Moscow and the capitals of Eastern Europe, the Pyongyang bureaucracy abandoned its anti-capitalist pretensions long ago and has been seeking to reach a deal with the major powers to establish North Korea as a cheap labour haven. Nonetheless, North Korea as a small, poverty-stricken nation has the right to arm itself, by any means available, against the growing military threat from US imperialism.

The pretext for the Bush administration's latest actions is the claim that North Korea has breached the Agreed Framework signed with the US in 1994. In October, after being confronted with American evidence, North Korea admitted to having established a secret uranium enrichment program in violation of international agreements and declared its intention to abrogate the 1994 deal.

White House spokesmen now piously declare that there can be no negotiations with Pyongyang until it demonstrates its willingness to abide by the Agreed Framework. North Korea's repeated offer to negotiate a comprehensive security pact with the US has been spurned. US Secretary of State Powell, for instance, told the media yesterday: "What they want is not a discussion. They want us to give them something for them to stop the bad behaviour. What we can't do is enter into a negotiation right away where we are appeasing them."

However, like the Bush administration's stance on other international treaties, its attitude to the Agreed Framework is completely one-sided. It expects North Korea to live up to all its obligations while ignoring the fact that the US has openly breached both the spirit and the letter of the agreement for years.

North Korea only signed the deal in 1994 after the Clinton administration threatened to carry out military strikes against its nuclear infrastructure. Under the arrangement, Pyongyang agreed to shut down its small 5MW nuclear research reactor, plutonium processing plant and associated facilities at Yongbyon and to halt construction on two nuclear power plants that were due to be completed by 1996. The latter was a major concession given the country's dire economic straits and desperate shortage of electricity.

In return, the Clinton administration promised to build two commercial lightwater reactors and to provide 500,000 tonnes of fuel oil annually, prior to the completion of the reactors. Unlike North Korea's gas-graphite reactors, the replacements would not have the same capacity to produce weapons-grade plutonium. While the US-led consortium has provided the fuel oil, the construction of the lightwater reactors, which was due to be completed by 2003, has barely started.

As far as Pyongyang was concerned, however, the most significant clause in the Agreed Framework was one that pledged to "move toward

full normalisation of political and economic relations". Specific promises included the reduction of trade and investment barriers, formal US assurances ruling out the threat or use of nuclear weapons against North Korea, and eventual moves towards the establishment of full diplomatic relations.

The clause was never treated seriously by Clinton, who, having extracted a North Korean pledge to shut its nuclear facilities, proceeded to make a string of further accusations and demands. His administration only lifted the US economic blockade of North Korea, in force since the Korean War, in 1999 and then only in a restricted fashion. Just prior to the 2000 election campaign, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made the first tentative high-level visit to Pyongyang.

Even these limited measures came to an abrupt halt when Bush was installed in office. In a recent letter to the UN, declaring the intention to reopen its nuclear facilities, Pyongyang specifically cited the US designation of North Korea as part of the "axis of evil" and as a target for nuclear attack as evidence for "the substantive breakdown of the Agreed Framework". As far as North Korea is concerned, it has gained nothing from the arrangement. The deal has not produced any normalisation of political and economic relations with the US; the completion of the lightwater reactors is nowhere in sight; and, since October, the US has punished North Korea for its uranium enrichment program by cutting off supplies of fuel oil.

The provocative character of the Bush administration's actions is highlighted by the fact that the Republican Party rightwing has long denounced the Agreed Framework. The very people who described the deal from the outset as grovelling appeasement and proof of Clinton's weakness on foreign policy now hold the levers of power. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the current incumbents in the White House have treated the terms of the Agreed Framework with ill-disguised contempt.

If the Bush administration has proceeded relatively slowly in confronting North Korea, it is because there are fears in US ruling circles about the consequences of such a reckless course of action. It is by no means certain that Washington will be able to bully South Korea, Japan, China and Russia into backing its blockade of North Korea. Official opposition has already been voiced in Moscow and Beijing. In South Korea, the outsider Roh Moo-myun won the recent presidential elections by appealing to growing popular hostility to Washington's belligerent policy towards North Korea and widespread fears of a military conflagration.

What is at stake in the current standoff is highlighted by the last major confrontation in 1994. As Clinton and his advisors dispatched stealth warplanes to South Korea and prepared to strike North Korea, knowing that the result could be full-scale war, the Pentagon presented the administration with a sobering calculation of the potential costs and casualties.

"General Luck [US commander in Korea] estimated, on the basis of the experience in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, that due to the colossal lethality of modern weapons in the urban environments of Korea, as many as one million people would be killed in the resumption of full-scale war on the peninsula, including 80,000 to 100,000 Americans, that the out-of-pocket costs to the United States would exceed \$100 billion, and that the destruction of property and interruption of business activity would cost more than \$1,000 billion dollars to the countries involved and their immediate neighbours" [*The Two Koreas*, Don Oberdorfer, p.324].

The Clinton administration was prepared to take an enormous gamble in order to extract an agreement from North Korea. Now those who berated him for his softness are careering down the path to conflict. No confidence whatsoever can be placed in their soothing public assurances that the situation is under control and that a military strike against North Korea is off the agenda. If war does erupt then the responsibility for its disastrous consequences lies squarely with the Bush administration and its allies.



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