

Pyongyang reacts to US threats by withdrawing from non-proliferation treaty

Peter Symonds
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Despite all its talk of a diplomatic solution to tensions on the Korean peninsula, the Bush administration's aggressive stance towards North Korea is rapidly leading to a full-blown confrontation. Faced with the prospect of deepening economic isolation and future US military action, Pyongyang last Friday announced that it intended to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty—a move that frees its hand to restart its nuclear facilities.

Boxed into a corner by Washington, North Korea is threatening not only to manufacture nuclear weapons but to restart its missile testing program, which has been on hold since 1999. Pyongyang's ambassador to China, Choe Jin-su, declared on Saturday: "Because all agreements have been nullified by the United States side, we believe we cannot go along with the self-imposed missile moratorium any longer."

The North Korean moves are a desperate attempt to jolt the Bush administration into opening negotiations, and, failing that, to deter the US from making it a military target after Washington finishes with Iraq. At the same time as issuing empty threats about turning "the citadel of imperialists into a sea of fire," Pyongyang has been frantically attempting to reach a deal to end the crisis.

Having been rebuffed by the White House for weeks, North Korea last weekend attempted to open up a backdoor communication channel via Bill Richardson, formerly US ambassador to the UN and now New Mexico governor. After lengthy discussions with two senior North Korean diplomats, Richardson reiterated Pyongyang's willingness to comply with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in return for a binding bilateral non-aggression pact with the US. In other words, North Korea is prepared to resolve the nuclear issue if Washington will formally guarantee that it will not suffer the same treatment as Iraq.

The Bush administration has dismissed the discussions in New Mexico as "nothing new" and continues to insist that North Korea must fully comply with US demands on its nuclear program before any negotiations can take place. For public consumption, Bush announced on Wednesday that he might consider reviving "an initiative which would talk about energy and food, because we care deeply about the suffering of the North Korean people". But US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly has been touring South Korea and China with the aim of tightening economic sanctions on North Korea.

North Korea was already teetering on the brink of economic collapse and widespread famine prior to the current crisis. Bush's cynical expressions of concern for the North Korean people did not prevent his administration from cutting off supplies of heavy fuel oil or suspending food aid to Pyongyang. As in the past, any new US

"initiative" on food and energy will be tied to a string of demands for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs and severely cut its conventional military forces.

Moreover, Pyongyang has no reason to believe Washington's claims that it will not resort to military action. Bush has branded Iraq and North Korea, along with Iran, as "an axis of evil" and elaborated a doctrine of "pre-emptive strikes". With the US military massing in preparation for a military invasion of Iraq, North Korea can only conclude that Washington's professed preference for "a diplomatic solution" on the Korean peninsula is no more than a temporary manoeuvre until the US has ousted Saddam Hussein.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* is irreconcilably opposed to the oppressive Stalinist regime in Pyongyang, the small, impoverished country has every right to arm itself against the threat of military action by US imperialism. As in the case of Iraq, the Bush administration's stance against North Korea has nothing to do with concerns about the fate of ordinary people. By ratcheting up tensions on the Korean peninsula, Washington is seeking to justify its continued military predominance in North East Asia and to further its economic and strategic interests in the region at the expense of its rivals—Japan and Europe.

The present crisis is the culmination of a series of steps taken by the Bush administration to overturn the policies of the Clinton administration and adopt a far more aggressive stance on North Korea.

In 1994, the Clinton White House brought the Korean peninsula to the brink of war when it threatened to strike North Korea's nuclear facilities. Pyongyang had declared that it was withdrawing from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Conflict was only averted at the last minute when former US president Jimmy Carter flew to Pyongyang to broker a deal under which North Korea would freeze, and eventually dismantle, its existing nuclear reactors in return for supplies of fuel oil and the construction of two light water power reactors.

The Bush administration precipitated the current confrontation in October when it pushed Pyongyang to admit that it was engaged in uranium enrichment. Washington claimed that the program was in breach of the Agreed Framework, even though uranium enrichment was not covered by the deal. The US bullied its allies into cutting off supplies of fuel oil to North Korea in November and Pyongyang responded by repudiating the 1994 agreement.

The Bush administration, with the support of a compliant media, has attempted to blame North Korea for the collapse of the Agreed Framework. But as a number of commentators have noted, the deal was a dead letter long before October. Academic David Kang, for instance, commented in the London-based *Financial Times*: "[B]oth Clinton and Bush violated the letter and the spirit of the agreement.

For example, the US promised under the framework to help North Korea build light water reactors that could not be used to make nuclear bombs. The first of these was due to come into operation this year but it was clear in 1998 that it could be at least three years behind schedule because of US reservations and hesitancy.”

North Korea saw in the agreement, which included a clause pledging the full normalisation of relations, the opportunity to end decades of US-imposed isolation. Immediately after his installation in office, Bush abruptly ended Clinton’s first tentative moves toward easing economic sanctions and holding high-level diplomatic discussions. He also made clear his opposition to the so-called Sunshine Policy of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, which sought to open up North Korea as a source of cheap labour for capitalist investment. When Washington finally offered a new round of talks, it was conditional on new demands for North Korea’s unilateral disarmament.

In recent days, it has become clear that the Bush administration was never serious about abiding by the Agreed Framework, which was denounced from the outset by the Republican rightwing as proof of Clinton’s impermissible softness towards North Korea. White House officials are no longer speaking about a return to the 1994 agreement. US Secretary of State Colin Powell commented on Tuesday that the US would require “a new arrangement” that would better restrain Pyongyang’s ability to produce nuclear weapons. He questioned whether the US would support the completion of the two light water reactors, which were only started last year.

Any discussion of a new agreement with Pyongyang remains a moot point, however. Even though the US is on the brink of war against Iraq, the Bush administration is already under pressure from its rightwing supporters to take tougher action against North Korea.

On January 13, the *Wall Street Journal* responded to criticism that the Bush administration was employing obvious double standards by preparing to go war to disarm Iraq while restricting itself to diplomatic measures against North Korea. Making clear that the difference in approach was purely tactical and temporary, the newspaper declared:

“No, the fastest way to impress one charter member of the ‘axis of evil’ is to depose another, and sooner rather than later. Certainly the sight of another dictator with nuclear ambitions being disarmed by a determined US President would give Kim something to think about. It would show US leadership and resolve, notwithstanding skittish allies, as well as the military capability to succeed. It would also show Kim that searching for a nuclear arsenal isn’t the safest career choice.

“Above all, toppling Saddam with dispatch would allow the US to turn its military attention away from the Gulf and toward the crisis in Korea. Does anyone doubt that if the US weren’t now building up forces near Iraq, one or more US aircraft carrier groups would be heading toward Northeast Asia?”

For some, however, Bush’s policy is itself an unpardonable concession. Gary Bauer, former head of the rightwing Family Research Council, denounced US Assistant Secretary Kelly for “not only suggesting we were prepared to hold talks with a gun pointed at our heads, but we might even be open to investing in North Korea under the right circumstances. This is a policy Clinton would be proud of, and it is because of his appeasement that we find ourselves in this position to begin with.”

Republican Senator John McCain has criticised the Bush administration for appearing to reject military action against North Korea. Writing in the rightwing mouthpiece, the *Weekly Standard*, he declared: “The administration now appears to have embraced, and in

some respects exceeded, the style and substance of Clinton’s diplomacy. Both the president and the secretary of state publicly ruled out the use of force, although force could eventually prove to be the only means to prevent North Korea from acquiring a nuclear arsenal—a dangerously shortsighted precedent that even the Clinton administration did not publicly suggest.”

McCain has joined three other senators in sponsoring legislation to formally scrap aid to North Korea under the 1994 Agreed Framework and to push for other measures against Pyongyang. These include the reintroduction of economic sanctions, the interdiction of North Korean weapons shipments and the strengthening of the US military posture in the region. The proposed legislation also demands a tough inspection regime for any new agreement with Pyongyang, which will require congressional approval.

Given the mounting pressure from its own rightwing constituency, there is no guarantee that the Bush administration will maintain its present course of action, even in the short term. Moreover, Washington’s campaign of economic and diplomatic pressure is effectively holding a gun to the head of the Pyongyang bureaucracy, forcing it to choose between capitulation and complete economic collapse. All sections of the North Korean economy and state apparatus, including the military, are starved of fuel, energy and spare parts. Washington’s bellicose stance is effectively cutting across plans for foreign investment as part of South Korea’s Sunshine Policy. Forced into a corner and with nothing to lose, a desperate regime may lash out in unpredictable ways.

Even if it decides to stop short of a military strike against North Korea, the Bush administration’s reckless policy in North East Asia threatens to destabilise the entire region. Both China and South Korea have expressed concerns about the economic and political implications of a social implosion in North Korea that sends floods of refugees across the border—an objective openly advocated by some in US ruling circles. If Pyongyang is driven to manufacture nuclear weapons or recommence missile testing, it threatens to precipitate a regional arms race, as Japan and South Korea seek to match North Korea, and poses the danger of a far broader military conflagration in the future.



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