

Blair blurts out the US agenda on North Korea

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3 February 2003

As it prepares to invade Iraq, the White House has been insisting for weeks that the crisis over North Korea's nuclear program will be resolved diplomatically without any resort to military measures. Last week, however, British Prime Minister Tony Blair let the cat out of the bag—after Iraq, North Korea is next.

Blair's comments came during a torrid question time in the House of Commons last Wednesday focussed on his government's support for a US attack on Iraq. After a heckler from his own Labour Party shouted out "who's next," he declared: "After we deal with Iraq, we do, yes, through the United Nations, have to confront North Korea about its weapons program."

On his way to talks with Bush on Friday, Blair elaborated further at a press conference in Madrid. If the world fails to enforce Iraqi disarmament, he exclaimed, "does anyone believe that North Korea will take us seriously." The obvious implication is that if Pyongyang fails to take Britain and the US seriously, it will receive the same treatment as Baghdad.

Needless to say Bush has not rebuked Blair. The international press, which ridicules North Korea as "paranoid" for pointing to the US military threat, paid little attention to the comments. After all, Blair was simply stating what is one of Washington's worst kept secrets: that US protestations of peaceful intent towards North Korea are simply a temporary tactic aimed at easing tensions until its war against Iraq is over.

Washington provoked the current confrontation last October with claims that Pyongyang had admitted establishing a uranium enrichment program. The US then pressed its allies to cut off oil supplies to North Korea—part of Pyongyang's compensation, under the 1994 Agreed Framework, for shutting down its nuclear reactor and halting construction on new ones. The US

has also halted humanitarian aid to North Korea that is desperately short of food and other basic supplies.

Backed into a corner, North Korea has responded by abrogating the 1994 deal, expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Pact and restarting its nuclear facilities. Pyongyang, which has been branded by Bush as part of an "axis of evil", is clearly concerned that Washington will take military action. It has repeatedly declared its willingness to provide the US with guarantees about its nuclear program if the US is prepared to sign a bilateral non-aggression pact.

The US has been considering the military option from the outset. South Korea's president-elect Roh Moo-hyun told a panel discussion on January 18 that the Bush administration had been contemplating a strike on North Korea's nuclear facilities last December during the South Korean presidential campaign. "At the time of the elections," he said, "some US officials, who held considerable responsibility in the administration, talked about the possibility of attacking North Korea.... Fortunately, opinion in the United States started to change to resolving the matter peacefully."

US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice dismissed Roh's statements and reiterated that Washington intends a diplomatic solution. But White House rhetoric towards North Korea is shifting. Speaking in South Korea on January 22, US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton declared: "For us, all options are on the table." Washington has not ruled out a military strike, he said, adding only, "We have no intentions of invading North Korea."

In the past few days, there have been further indications that the Bush administration is taking steps

towards a possible air attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities.

The *New York Times* last Thursday cited claims by US officials to have spy satellite photographs of North Korea's nuclear complex at Yongbyon showing trucks entering and leaving the building where spent fuel rods are stored. According to the CIA, if the 8,000 rods were reprocessed, North Korea could extract enough weapons-grade plutonium to construct an estimated six to eight nuclear weapons.

The article indicated that US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is focussing considerable attention on North Korea, even as the US prepares to invade Iraq. "Within the last week, Mr Rumsfeld has taken part in several video conferences with commanders in the Pacific, including General Leon LaPorte, the commander of American forces in South Korea. Mr Rumsfeld is meeting with General LaPorte this week, while the general is in Washington for a conference.

"Mr Rumsfeld has pressed his top military adviser not only on the options for using force preemptively against North Korea, but also on how to ensure that as the United States prepares for a possible war with Iraq, American forces are positioned to deter and, if needed, wage a second conflict on the Korean peninsula, officials said."

On Friday, a CBS News report revealed that the US commander in the Pacific, Admiral Thomas Fargo, had requested a build-up of US forces, including an additional 2,000 troops to support 37,000 US soldiers already stationed in South Korea. Fargo also called for the deployment of two dozen long range bombers—B-52s and B-1s—to Guam, which would place North Korea within striking distance. Eight F-15 fighter-bombers as well as U-2 and other reconnaissance aircraft, would be sent to Japan and South Korea.

Pentagon officials insisted that the request still had to be approved by Rumsfeld and that it was not a sign of imminent military action, only prudent planning. At the very least, however, such a move is aimed at menacing North Korea. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer warned on Friday that any steps towards the reprocessing of spent fuel rods would be regarded as "yet another provocative action by North Korea."

Washington has been putting pressure on China, Russia, South Korea and Japan to isolate North Korea with the aim of creating an economic and social

collapse. The White House has ruled out any bilateral negotiations and is pressing for the issue of North Korea's nuclear program to be discussed in the UN Security Council. Pyongyang has declared that it would consider any imposition of sanctions as an act of war.

As in the case of Iraq, Washington's aggressive stance towards Pyongyang has nothing to do with its alleged weapons of mass destruction. North Korea's nuclear program is a convenient pretext for maintaining a strong US military presence in the region. Unlike Iraq, North Korea does not possess huge reserves of oil or other natural resources, but it does occupy a key strategic location in North East Asia. By bullying North Korea, the Bush administration not only indirectly threatens declared "strategic competitor" China but is also able to dictate terms to its allies—Japan and South Korea, in particular.

Just how far Washington is prepared to go in recklessly pursuing its goals was indicated by Blair. Any military strike on North Korea threatens to precipitate a war on the Korean peninsula that has the potential to escalate into a broader conflict with catastrophic consequences.



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