

Bush threatens military action against North Korea

Peter Symonds
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With tensions rapidly spiralling out of control on the Korean peninsula, US President Bush added further fuel to the fire yesterday by bluntly warning North Korea that, while the US was seeking a diplomatic solution, “all options are on the table, of course.” Bush previously insisted that Washington had no plans to attack or invade North Korea. Now a military strike is firmly on the agenda.

Pentagon officials announced on Monday that 12 B-1 and 12 B-52 bombers had been put on alert for rapid deployment to Guam, placing them within striking distance of North Korea. Extra reconnaissance aircraft are to be sent to the region along with additional military personnel to bolster the 37,000 US troops currently stationed in South Korea. The aircraft carrier, USS Carl Vinson, is also on standby to back up the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk, which is currently off the coast of Japan.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer declared that any US military build-up near North Korea was aimed at making “certain our contingencies are viable.” The choice of long-range bombers demonstrates that at least one of the “contingencies” being planned is a preemptive military strike on North Korea’s nuclear facilities—at Yongbyon in particular.

Pyongyang responded angrily on Thursday, warning that any US attack on its nuclear installations would “spark off a total war”. Speaking to the BBC, senior North Korean foreign ministry official Ri Pyong-gap said: “If the US steps their boots over the borderline, we’ll take strong countermeasures. A preemptive attack is not something only the United States can do. We also can do that, when it is a matter of life or death.”

The Clinton administration brought the Korean peninsula to the brink of war in 1993 when it positioned bombers for a preemptive strike against the Yongbyon nuclear plant. The conflict was only averted when North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear facilities and place them under international inspection. As part of the 1994 Agreed Framework signed with Pyongyang, Washington pledged to provide supplies of fuel oil, to construct replacement lightwater power reactors and to move to normalise relations.

The Bush administration provoked the current crisis last October with claims that Pyongyang had admitted establishing a uranium enrichment program in breach of international

agreements. When the US ended the supplies of fuel oil due under the Agreed Framework, North Korea responded by declaring the agreement void and then withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation agreement. It has expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors from the country and declared on Wednesday that it was restarting its 5MW research reactor at Yongbyon.

US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld responded to the announced reactor start-up by conjuring up fresh accusations against Pyongyang. He alleged that North Korea might be planning to make nuclear weapons, not only for its own defence, but for sale to other countries. “That is something the world has to take very seriously,” he declared, adding: “It’s a regime that is a terrorist regime. It’s a regime that has been involved in things that are harmful to other countries.”

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage made similarly vague and unsubstantiated allegations when he appeared before the US Congress this week. He said that “the possibility of proliferation... is our major fear from North Korea—that she could pass on fissile material and other nuclear technology to either transnational actors or to rogue states”. Armitage claimed that North Korea could build four to six new nuclear weapons within months if it began reprocessing an estimated 8,000 spent fuel rods that have been in storage since 1994.

Neither Rumsfeld nor Armitage offered any evidence to support their claims or indicated which “transnational [terrorist] actors” or “rogue states” were being referred to. No proof was provided that North Korea has previously sold or attempted to sell fissile material or nuclear technology. The only sales that the US has objected to in the past have been of medium-range ballistic missiles—a trade that breaches no international law and pales into insignificance alongside the huge US arms sales.

North Korea insists that the purpose of its nuclear program, which includes two uncompleted power reactors as well as its small research reactor at Yongbyon, is to provide much-needed electricity. Even if Pyongyang were engaged in producing nuclear weapons, its actions would be completely legitimate. The small, impoverished nation confronts the world’s most heavily armed military superpower. Bush has branded North Korea, along with Iraq, part of an “axis of evil” and proclaimed

a doctrine of preemptive attack against any threat to US interests. Moreover, under the Bush administration, the Pentagon has elaborated a new nuclear strategy that permits the use of nuclear weapons in a far broader range of battlefield scenarios.

Pyongyang can only conclude from the latest demagogic statements of Rumsfeld and Armitage that Washington is preparing to attack. Citing a senior administration official, the *New York Times* reported yesterday that the US had warned North Korea via third parties that restarting its plutonium reprocessing plant would be “a particularly bad step”—in other words, the trigger for a US military strike on the plant.

Bush repeated yesterday that he prefers a diplomatic solution but that provides cold comfort to North Korea. The White House has rejected North Korea’s offer of bilateral negotiations and its proposal to provide guarantees on its nuclear program in return for a bilateral non-aggression pact. While US officials have referred vaguely to the possibility of talks with Pyongyang, none are planned or proposed. Moreover, Washington has ruled out any negotiations, declaring it will not be “blackmailed” by North Korea. Any “talks” would simply be a restatement of US demands.

The Bush administration’s “diplomacy” has nothing to do with normalising relations with North Korea. Washington is seeking to cajole and bully the neighbouring states—its allies Japan and South Korea, as well as China and Russia—into isolating Pyongyang politically and economically. The US is pressing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to declare North Korea in breach of its international obligations and to refer the matter to the UN Security Council. An IAEA emergency meeting is scheduled for February 12.

But the US objective is not simply to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear program. When Bush came to office in 2001 he abruptly broke off the Clinton administration’s negotiations with North Korea and, after a lengthy policy review, drew up a long list of demands to serve on Pyongyang—an end to missile testing, production and sales; an end to any chemical and biological weapons programs; cutbacks to conventional military capability, and so on. Each or all of them can be used as a pretext for maintaining North Korea’s isolation and stepping up tensions on the Korean peninsula.

The Bush administration has scarcely concealed the fact that one of its aims, as in the case of Iraq, is to bring about “a regime change” in North Korea. Its preferred method is exactly what it accuses the Stalinist regime of: to starve the North Korean population in order to provoke an economic and political collapse. Not only has Washington cut off fuel supplies, it has also ended all humanitarian aid, including vital emergency food assistance to the country, which is struggling to recover from a series of devastating droughts and floods during the 1990s.

A *Guardian* reporter described the situation in Pyongyang. “American cuts to vital heavy oil and a shortfall of

international food aid have confirmed North Korea’s image of itself as a fortress being starved into submission. This is one of the coldest winters in recent times, with the Taedong River freezing over amid temperatures as low as -21C. The electricity shortage is apparent in classrooms where students wear coats and gloves; in apartment blocks where all lifts are out of action; and in dimly lit museums and universities.

“Food rations have been cut as United Nations appeals for donations passed unheard in Washington and Tokyo. Government officials say schoolchildren now get just 300 grams of food a day, down from 500 grams. The situation is not yet as bad as the famine of the late 90s, but world food program stocks are due to run out within weeks.”

After a visit to North Korea late last month, Canadian diplomat Maurice Strong, who serves as a special envoy to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, warned that the country was desperately in need of food and medicine. He said that the world food program needed 97,000 tonnes of food just for the first quarter of the year and some \$US250 million in aid for the remainder. Strong said that there had been “a very meagre response of some \$US10 million from the European Community.”

Washington, however, is pressing Beijing in particular to tighten the noose around North Korea. China is the country’s main trading partner, accounting for about 70 percent of North Korea’s oil as well as grain, vegetables and other supplies. In recent days, a number of comments have appeared in the US press noting the “reluctance” of China to use its influence with Pyongyang. The implication is obvious: China should assist the US in bringing North Korea to its knees economically.

In his comments yesterday, Bush noted he had just rung Chinese President Jiang Zemin and “reminded him that we have a joint responsibility to uphold the goal... of a nuclear weapons-free peninsula.” The pointed references to China are not accidental. After all, Washington’s objectives in the region go well beyond North Korea. By maintaining a constant state of tension on the Korean peninsula, the US is able to use its overwhelming military superiority to dictate terms in North East Asia, especially to China, which Bush has branded “a strategic competitor”.

The US administration’s actions are having a profoundly destabilising impact on the region. As it prepares for an imminent invasion of Iraq, Washington is downplaying the Korean crisis. But the events it has set in motion have a remorseless logic of their own. They threaten to plunge the Korean peninsula into a war that has the potential to set off a far broader conflict.



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