

Washington prepares to tighten the economic noose around North Korea

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Even as it is preparing to launch war against Iraq, the Bush administration is planning a series of provocative new steps designed to heighten tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

According to a report in yesterday's *New York Times*, the Pentagon and State Department are drawing up detailed plans to impose what amounts to an economic blockade of North Korea over its nuclear program. The measures include the halting of weapons sales and the blocking of remittances from Koreans living in Japan—effectively blocking two of North Korea's main sources of foreign exchange.

Citing senior administration officials, the newspaper explained: "Pentagon planners are looking closely at using American military forces to stop, turn back or seize ships and aircraft from North Korea that are suspected of carrying missiles or nuclear weapons materials." While North Korea has previously sold missiles to a number of countries, there is no evidence that it has ever been involved selling "nuclear weapons materials".

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made the amalgam last week when he branded North Korea as "the world's greatest proliferator of missile technology" and in the next breath declared: "I see North Korea as a threat as a [nuclear] proliferator more than I see them a nuclear threat on the peninsula." His comments to the US Senate follow previous remarks in which he denounced Pyongyang as "a terrorist regime".

While insisting that it is working towards a "diplomatic solution," Washington has made a number of thinly veiled references to the possibility of a US military strike on North Korea's nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. Just over a week ago, President Bush declared that all options were on the table. Rumsfeld has placed two dozen long-range B-1 and B-52 bombers on standby for deployment to the Pacific Island of Guam, within striking distance of North Korea.

Rumsfeld told the US Senate last week that he was considering "restructuring" US forces in South Korea, including moving some of the 37,000 American troops away from Seoul and the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) with North Korea. He claimed that the proposal was not related to the current confrontation with Pyongyang. But such a move would reduce the ability of North Korea to use its rockets and artillery

to retaliate in the event of US air strikes on its nuclear facilities.

The Pentagon is also proceeding with annual joint war games with the South Korean military over the next month—from March 4 to April 2.

Washington's diplomacy is as aggressive as its military stance. North Korea has offered to give guarantees on its nuclear program to the US in return for the signing of a formal non-aggression agreement between the two countries. But White House officials have repeatedly spurned bilateral negotiations and insist instead on multilateral talks involving Japan, South Korea, Russia and China.

The purpose of the "multilateral approach" is to dictate terms to the major regional powers as well as to isolate North Korea diplomatically and economically. With the backing of the US, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) last week declared North Korea to be in breach of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and referred the matter to the UN Security Council.

Washington provoked the current crisis last October when it accused North Korea of establishing a secret uranium enrichment program in breach of its international obligations. After claiming that Pyongyang admitted to the program, the Bush administration cut off supplies of fuel oil to North Korea. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework between the two countries, Pyongyang agreed to mothball its existing nuclear facilities in return for fuel oil, the construction of two lightwater power reactors and the normalisation of relations.

North Korea responded to the US moves by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, expelling international inspectors and restarting its small experimental 5MW nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. According to a report in the British-based *Telegraph*, North Korea plans to build four new nuclear power plants with a capacity of up to 200MW. Director of Energy Kim Jae-rok told the newspaper that "desperate measures" were needed to "enable us to meet the urgent need for electricity supplies in our country."

North Korea has denied US allegations that it is constructing nuclear weapons. The CIA has offered no evidence for its claim that the country may already have one or two nuclear bombs other than the fact that the existing reactor could have produced sufficient weapons-grade plutonium prior to its shutdown in

1994. Similarly, US warnings that North Korea could have enough nuclear material to make six to eight bombs within two to three months are based on nothing more than a calculation of the amount of plutonium contained in 8,000 spent fuels rods that have been stored under IAEA supervision for the last eight years.

Boxed into a corner, North Korea has reacted to US threats with its own hostile statements, declaring that it regards any economic blockade as tantamount to a declaration of war and reserves the right to take “pre-emptive action” to defend itself. Pyongyang’s empty boasts about being able to strike the United States and to “win” any nuclear confrontation have simply provided grist to the mill for the most rightwing sections of the US political establishment.

After the IAEA decision last week, the US indicated that it will not be asking the UN Security Council for economic sanctions on North Korea immediately. The relatively low-key approach is aimed partly at keeping the pressure on the UN over its plans for invading Iraq. At the same time, however, the US is not in a position to implement its “multilateral approach” as it lacks the backing of other countries.

Only Japan has been supportive of the US. Like Washington, Tokyo has been drawing up plans for restricting travel, trade and remittances to North Korea. Japan’s trade with North Korea was \$US470 million in 2001 making it North Korea’s second largest trading partner after China. North Korea also receives an estimated \$150 million from Koreans living in Japan.

The Japanese government has also adopted a more aggressive military stance, threatening to make a preemptive military strike in the event of any North Korean military threat to Japan. Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba declared last week: “It’s too late if [a missile] flies towards Japan. Our nation will use military force as a self-defence measure if [North Korea] starts to resort to arms against Japan.”

However, South Korean president-elect Roh Moo-hyun has opposed economic sanctions and ruled out any support for a US military strike on North Korea. Roh, who takes office on February 25, was quoted by a senior party official as saying: “I cannot agree to attacking [North Korea]. We can fully cooperate [with the US], but not on this one.”

Roh won last year’s presidential election by appealing to growing opposition to the US military presence in South Korea and hostility to the Bush administration’s belligerent stance towards North Korea. Many South Koreans had hoped that the so-called sunshine policy of the current president Kim Dae-jung would ease tensions on the peninsula and open up the prospect of reuniting families who have been divided for decades. When Bush took office in 2001, he immediately ended US high-level talks with North Korea and cut directly across the sunshine policy.

In an effort to bring Roh into line, the Bush administration invited his representatives to talks in Washington a fortnight

ago. The discussions, however, simply underscored Roh’s opposition to any economic blockade of North Korea. According to the *New York Times*, several American participants at a private dinner intended as “a frank, off-the-record exchange” said “mouths dropped when a senior South Korean envoy said that if it had to choose, the incoming government would prefer that North Korea had nuclear weapons to seeing it collapse.”

The Bush administration has also been pressing China and Russia to put pressure on North Korea. White House officials have complained publicly that Beijing in particular should be doing more, hinting that China’s trade and economic assistance to North Korea could be used to blackmail Pyongyang. To date, however, Beijing has refused to support economic sanctions. Last week, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue rebutted criticisms, declaring “China has made lots of efforts in our own way” and repeated the call for US to engage in bilateral dialogue with North Korea.

Likewise, Moscow has not agreed to US demands. Russia along with Cuba were the only two nations to abstain during the IAEA vote on North Korea. The Russian representative issued a statement saying: “We consider the sending of this question to the UN Security Council to be a premature and counterproductive step.” Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov called for measures “to return the situation on the Korean peninsula to a political channel.”

Moscow and Beijing are well aware that North Korea’s nuclear program is simply the immediate pretext for Washington to adopt a more aggressive diplomatic and military posture in North East Asia. By bracketing North Korea as part of the “axis of evil”, Bush made clear that his administration’s ultimate objective is not a new agreement with Pyongyang but its overthrow. As in the case of Iraq, Washington wants a “regime change” in North Korea as a means to establishing its hegemony in the region, particular over China, which Bush has declared to be America’s “strategic competitor”.



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