

US boosts capacity to launch air strikes on North Korea

Peter Symonds
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Even as the US prepares to launch an all-out invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has sharply raised the military stakes on the Korean peninsula by significantly bolstering its ability to launch air strikes on North Korea.

Last week the Pentagon dispatched six F-117A stealth fighters to South Korea, nominally as part of annual joint exercises. The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its associated battle group arrived at the port of Busan last weekend carrying 5,000 soldiers and sailors. They joined South Korean troops and the 37,000 US troops permanently stationed in South Korea for military drills scheduled to run to April 2.

US officials have attempted to downplay the deployments that follow the dispatch of two dozen long-range bombers to Guam, within striking distance of North Korea. US Ambassador Thomas Hubbard told a business luncheon in Seoul: “There is nothing new. It [the exercise] takes place every year about this time.” American military officials claimed that the moves were not connected to tensions with North Korea.

The deployment of F-117A warplanes is, however, clearly aimed at sending a message to Pyongyang. The radar-evading stealth fighters were last sent to South Korea in 1993 when the Clinton administration was on the brink of ordering an attack on North Korean nuclear facilities. As all sides were acutely aware, such an air raid had the potential for triggering a devastating full-scale war on the peninsula.

A military confrontation was only averted at the last minute when Pyongyang agreed to shut down its existing nuclear program in return for two new lightwater power reactors, supplies of fuel oil and a US promise to normalise relations. The 1994 Agreed Framework, which was never fully implemented under Clinton, was undermined from the outset by the Bush

administration. On assuming power in 2001, Bush broke off all discussions with North Korea and, in 2002, branded it part of “an axis of evil” along with Iraq and Iran.

The latest crisis erupted in October when US officials claimed that North Korea had admitted to establishing a secret uranium enrichment program. After Pyongyang indicated that it would restart its nuclear program, Washington cut off supplies of fuel oil and suspended desperately needed food aid. Tensions have rapidly escalated since North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Agreement, expelled international inspectors and restarted a small test reactor.

Over the past month, North Korea has test-fired two short-ranged missiles. On March 2, four North Korean fighters intercepted a US RC-135S reconnaissance aircraft in the Sea of Japan off the North Korean coast. Washington has seized upon every incident to justify a military build-up aimed against North Korea—describing Pyongyang’s reactions as “paranoid” and “provocative” and its own moves as purely “defensive”.

The absurdity of the US propaganda is apparent if one considers how Washington would react to the sudden appearance of a military reconnaissance aircraft off the US coastline. Or to the presence of heavily-armed foreign troops engaged in military exercises in a bordering country. The answer is obvious: the US would react immediately and aggressively.

At present, the Bush administration insists that it is seeking “a diplomatic solution” to the North Korean standoff. US officials have, however, consistently ruled out bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang and have called for “a multilateral approach” instead. The aim of this “multilateral approach” is to bully and pressure its

allies South Korea and Japan as well as China and Russia into bringing North Korea to its knees by isolating the country politically and economically.

North Korea is already facing a desperate economic crisis. The Bush administration's increasingly aggressive stance has effectively stymied the so-called "sunshine policy" of South Korea's former president Kim Dae-jung, which sought to open up North Korea as a source of cheap labour. Plans for transport routes and pipelines through North Korea have been put on hold. The country faces chronic shortages of food, oil and electricity.

Last week Mehr Khan, regional director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), issued a special appeal for \$12 million in emergency assistance to provide food and basic medicines to North Korean children. She warned that food supplies would run out by the middle of the year unless further assistance was received. "There is nothing in the pipeline for food contributions," she told the press. "Unless urgent assistance is provided, we could see malnutrition rates go up."

The Bush administration, which hypocritically berates North Korean leader Kim Jong-il for "starving his people," only agreed to resume limited emergency food aid last month. Washington has promised to supply between 40,000 and 100,000 tonnes of food via the World Food Program (WFP)—down from over 150,000 tonnes last year. WFP officials have indicated that 250,000 tonnes of food is required just for the remainder of the year.

If the threat of economic collapse fails to force Pyongyang's submission to US demands, Bush and other White House officials have repeatedly stated that "all options are on the table"—that is, including the military one.

US officials have hinted at the existence of certain "red lines" that would provoke a military strike if crossed by Pyongyang. A possible trigger could be if North Korea restarted its reprocessing plant at Yongbyon and began to extract plutonium from spent nuclear fuel rods. Last week US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly pointed to another trigger when he indicated that North Korea's uranium enrichment program was "probably only months, not years away" from producing weapons-grade material.

The US has provocatively restarted its reconnaissance

flights off the North Korean coast. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, the decision was only taken after a sharp debate in the Pentagon and Bush administration over whether or not to provide a fighter escort. Although the hard-line elements arguing for a "strong show of force" backed off temporarily, the flights will be closely monitored to provide early warning of any North Korean aircraft.

While the Bush administration's immediate target is North Korea, its aims are far broader. Washington is using its military muscle to dictate terms in North East Asia, in particular to China, which Bush branded "a strategic competitor" during the 2000 US presidential campaign.

US Vice President Richard Cheney has obliquely threatened Beijing with a regional arms race, and a nuclear-armed Japan, if it fails to pull Pyongyang into line. If North Korea has a nuclear weapons capacity, he commented recently, "others, perhaps Japan, for example, may be forced to consider whether or not they want to readdress the nuclear question. That's not in China's interest."

The Japanese government, which has firmly backed Washington, has used the North Korean crisis to adopt a more aggressive military stance. Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba argued last month that the country's constitution, which prohibits the use of arms except for self-defence, should not bar Japan from taking pre-emptive action against the threat of a North Korean missile attack. In line with the US build-up, the Japanese military has moved one of its sophisticated Aegis destroyers into the Sea of Japan adjacent to North Korea. Senior Japanese politicians have also raised the possibility of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons.



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