

Pentagon sabre-rattling prior to US-North Korean talks in Beijing

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23 April 2003

“Provocative,” “reckless” and “irrational” are words commonly used in the international media to describe the actions of the North Korean regime and to vilify its leader Kim Jong Il. But as senior US, Chinese and North Korean officials prepare to meet today in Beijing for three days of talks, the terms apply more appropriately to the menacing stance of Bush administration, which threatens to plunge the Korean peninsula into war if its demands for the dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear programs are not met.

Just days before the talks were due to start, the most militaristic sections of the US administration sent a clear message to Pyongyang that nothing short of complete capitulation on its part was acceptable. In a highly provocative move, Pentagon officials informed the *New York Times* of a classified memorandum advocating regime change in North Korea, which was being circulated by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to senior White House officials, including Vice President Richard Cheney.

The proposal to work with Beijing to oust Kim Jong Il cut directly across the Bush administration’s repeated public statements that it has no such agenda. As the *New York Times* explained, “[T]he memo’s main argument, that Washington’s goal should be the collapse of Kim Jong Il’s government, seems at odds with the State Department approach of convincing Mr. Kim, in the words of one senior administration official, ‘that we’re not trying to take him out.’”

The existence of the memo will only heighten Pyongyang’s publicly expressed fears that, having seized control of Iraq, the US administration now intends to invoke its doctrine of “preemptive war” against North Korea. Over the last two years the Bush administration has adopted a highly belligerent stance towards Pyongyang—first breaking off high-level discussions begun under President Clinton and then, in early 2002, branding North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as part of an “axis of evil.”

Washington’s decision to launch war on Iraq, despite the failure of UN inspectors to find any evidence of so-called weapons of mass destruction, has caused Pyongyang to conclude that the only way to avoid a similar fate is to arm itself. Last Friday North Korea issued a public statement, declaring: “The Iraqi war teaches a lesson that in order to

prevent war and defend the security of a country and the sovereignty of a nation, it is necessary to have a powerful physical deterrent force only.”

The *New York Times* article reported that the secret Pentagon memo favoured “diplomatic pressure” rather than military action to precipitate the collapse of the Pyongyang regime. Just last month, however, the US greatly enhanced its ability to launch air strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities by dispatching two dozen B-1 and B-52 long-range bombers to the Pacific Island of Guam as well as F-117A stealth fighters to South Korea. In the course of sharpening tensions over the last six months, President Bush and other top officials have pointedly refused to rule out military strikes against North Korea.

To reinforce the message, a front-page article in the *Australian* newspaper on Monday provided details of the Pentagon’s contingency plans for air strikes against North Korea in the event that Pyongyang began to reprocess spent nuclear fuel rods to obtain weapons-grade plutonium. Based on “well-informed Canberra sources close to US thinking,” the proposals include attacks on North Korea’s artillery positions near the border with South Korea as well as on its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. This completely reckless plan is based on the assumption that the strikes “would not produce catastrophic radioactive fallout” and would not “lead to North Korea’s initiating a general war.”

The Pentagon has, of course, refused to acknowledge the existence of such contingency plans. But Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer indirectly confirmed the article’s validity when he told a radio station on Tuesday: “It’s one of those stories which probably is perfectly true... but there again, the Americans would have contingency plans for any range of different military options.” While, as Downer noted, it does not mean the US is about to conduct such a strike, the deliberate leaking of the information is designed to intensify the pressure on Pyongyang.

The current confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang erupted last October when a US negotiating team headed by James Kelly claimed that North Korean officials had admitted to having a uranium enrichment program in violation of international agreements. Tensions rapidly escalated after the

Bush administration cut off fuel oil being supplied to North Korea under the 1994 Agreed Framework to compensate Pyongyang for mothballing its nuclear reactors and associated facilities. North Korea only agreed to the deal under duress after the Clinton administration threatened to attack the Yongbyon plant in 1993.

Since October, North Korea has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Agreement, expelled international nuclear inspectors and restarted its small experimental reactor at Yongbyon. Despite repeated Pyongyang's repeated offers to negotiate nuclear safeguards in return for US guarantees against military attack, Washington has refused to engage in bilateral talks or to hold discussions prior to North Korea ending its nuclear programs.

Today's talks in Beijing are the result of intense pressure on China to haul its ally North Korea into line. According to an article in the *Washington Post* on April 4, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Foreign Wang Yi warned Pyongyang to stop "playing with fire" when he met with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun in mid-February. To underscore the warning and North Korea's heavy economic dependence on China, Beijing cut off the pipeline from its northern Daqing oil fields to North Korea for three days.

While China refused to back a UN Security Council resolution last month condemning North Korea over its nuclear program, Beijing did set up the current talks for Washington. Even then, the most right-wing sections of the administration—the so-called neo-conservatives or neo-cons centred in the Pentagon—remained opposed to any discussions prior to North Korea meeting US demands in full. North Korea is one of the issues involved in the sharp infighting reported between the US Defence and State Departments.

Last week the Pentagon attempted to take effective control of the agenda at the Beijing talks. The *Washington Post* reported yesterday that the Defence Department had proposed to replace James Kelly as head of the delegation to Beijing with John Bolton, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control, who is closely identified with Rumsfeld and the neo-cons.

When that proposal was rejected, Pentagon officials sought to undermine the Beijing meeting, by highlighting North Korea's statement last Friday, which declared that its plutonium processing plant was already operating. As it turned out, the English translation was faulty and the corrected version made clear North Korea was "successfully going forward to reprocess" the rods—that is, in the future. The leaked Pentagon documents were part of these efforts to block the talks.

While the US press has focused a good deal of attention on the tensions within the Bush administration, the differences between the State and Defence Departments are purely tactical. Both wings are united in their hostility to the 1994 Agreed Framework, which has been widely criticised by the Republican rightwing as an impermissible concession to North Korea that has only encouraged further "blackmail".

Washington has made clear that there will be no return to the 1994 agreement and that North Korea's nuclear facilities will have to be dismantled, not simply frozen. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declared yesterday: "The issue for us is how to achieve a verifiable, irreversible end to North Korea's nuclear program."

In fact, despite Washington's claims that "regime change" in Pyongyang is not policy, its stated aims strongly imply just that. The US insistence on "multilateral talks" is simply a term used to disguise diplomatic efforts to strong-arm China, South Korea, Japan and Russia into isolating North Korea politically and economically. The threat implicit in such a strategy is: accept Washington's demands or face an economic and political collapse. If that fails, as Bush and other officials have repeatedly declared, all options, including the military one, remain on the table.

Washington's claims that North Korea poses a military threat to the US are absurd. The small impoverished country has been on the verge of economic collapse since the fall of the Soviet Union ended economic assistance and dramatically reduced its export trade. While the Stalinist regime's own policies of national autarky and internal repression have contributed substantially to the country's deepening economic crisis, those problems have been compounded by Washington's continuing economic blockade.

As in the case of Iraq, the Bush administration's expressions of concern over North Korea's so-called weapons of mass destruction and its internal policies are nothing but a pretext for advancing its own economic and strategic ambitions. Unlike Iraq, the Korean peninsula does not contain huge reserves of oil, but its strategic location makes it an ideal means for the US to put pressure on its neighbours—Japan, Russia and particularly China. Whatever the public rhetoric emanating from the talks in Beijing over the next three days, these are the underlying interests that Washington will be pressing behind closed doors.



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