

# US prepares military blockade against North Korea

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell signalled this week that the Bush administration intends to press ahead with plans to impose what amounts to a military blockade of North Korea—an action that threatens to plunge North East Asia into war.

Powell told the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum in Cambodia on Wednesday that there was “no issue of greater urgency to the United States than North Korea’s nuclear weapons program”. Claiming that North Korean missiles posed a threat to every nation in the region, he called on ASEAN leaders to put diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang to accede to US demands.

The US, however, is demanding more than sharp diplomatic protests to Pyongyang. North Korea’s nuclear program and its so-called weapons of mass destruction has become the pretext for isolating the small, backward country, further crippling its economy and bringing the Stalinist regime to its knees. Powell boasted to reporters that the US had “aligned the international community in a way that makes it clear to North Korea that they will not have any support or friends helping them.”

The thrust of Washington’s plan was agreed at a little-reported meeting in Madrid last week, which included its military allies in the Iraq war—Britain and Australia—as well as Japan, Germany, France and other European countries. The so-called Madrid initiative is a far-reaching proposal to legitimise what previously has been regarded as piracy or an act of war—the interception of ships on the high seas and aircraft in international airspace—in the name of halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Few details have been released. But Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer confirmed in parliament on Monday that the meeting had agreed on “new and imaginative measures” that would include “the searching of transport planes and vessels and tightening of relevant domestic and international law.” “We are looking at

practical cooperation with key countries to deny North Korea access or further access to weapons of mass destruction material and to deny access to markets as well,” he said.

Washington’s uncharacteristic concern for international law follows a highly embarrassing incident last December when Spanish and US warships intercepted a North Korean freighter in international waters in the Arabian Sea. Images of 15 medium-range Scud missiles and conventional warheads discovered by a boarding party were quickly beamed around the world. The US action had all the hallmarks of a provocation linked to its search for a pretext for war against Iraq. But it rapidly fell apart when Yemen, a US ally, claimed the cargo, insisted that the purchase was legal and demanded its release. The Bush administration reluctantly agreed.

The affair highlighted the fact that North Korea’s sale of missiles is not “illicit trading,” as claimed by Downer in the Australian parliament. It is a small part of the huge international arms trade in which US corporations have the lion’s share. Pyongyang’s missile trade is no more “illicit” than the massive sales of US hi-tech weaponry that the Bush administration actively encourages and promotes. Washington is seeking international agreement to ensure that it determines which weapons shipments are deemed “illegal” and thus subject to military blockade.

North Korea has reacted angrily to the threat of a US-led military blockade, declaring that it would be an act of war. The country is already in severe economic straits and relies heavily on its missile sales, which are one of its few major sources of foreign revenue. Pyongyang’s official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, warned that North Korea would take “an immediate physical retaliatory step against the US, once it judges that its sovereignty is infringed by Washington’s blockade operation.”

The Stalinist regime has clearly drawn the conclusion from the fate of Iraq that it is futile to try to accommodate

to US demands for disarmament. Notwithstanding the fact that Baghdad agreed to the most stringent measures to prove it had no weapons of mass destruction and the UN inspection teams found none, the US still launched its invasion. “The Iraqi war proved that disarmament leads to a war,” *Rodong Sinmun* declared, warning: “We will step up our efforts to strengthen our nuclear deterrent capabilities as a means of self-defence against the United States.”

Powell reacted dismissively to North Korea’s statements, declaring: “We will not be intimidated by their rhetoric or their actions.” He denied that the US had any aggressive intention, asserting that “North Korea hides behind the false claim that the United States is threatening to attack it.” Even on the face of it, Powell’s statement is absurd. President Bush and senior US officials have pointedly declared that “all options” are on the table. The Pentagon has moved two dozen long-range bombers to Guam, within striking distance of North Korea, and sophisticated stealth aircraft to bases in South Korea.

North Korea has repeatedly indicated its willingness to negotiate an end to its nuclear programs if the US signs a non-aggression pact guaranteeing the country’s security. But the Bush administration has denounced such offers as “blackmail” and refuses to hold bilateral talks with Pyongyang. Instead the US is insisting on “multilateral diplomacy” involving North Korea’s neighbours—a thinly disguised means for marshalling support from South Korea, Japan and China for punitive measures if North Korea fails to agree to US demands.

The most rightwing sections of the Bush administration openly discuss a military strike on North Korea and the need for regime change in Pyongyang. Just last week Richard Perle, former chairman and now member of the Pentagon’s Defence Policy Board, publicly questioned Powell’s strategy of isolating North Korea, indicating that a military attack may be needed. Perle was one of the chief architects of the Iraq invasion.

“I don’t think anyone can exclude a kind of surgical strike that we saw in 1981 when the Israelis destroyed the Osirik reactor [in Iraq], because they knew that if that reactor went unmolested it would eventually produce nuclear weapons,” Perle said. To justify such unprovoked aggression, he baldly asserted, without offering any evidence, that North Korea would be willing to sell nuclear weapons to Al Qaeda and had to be prevented from producing them.

Perle’s comments reflect the aggressive and reckless

approach that the Bush administration has adopted to North Korea since coming to office. Bush abruptly ended the high-level diplomatic contact of the previous Clinton administration and effectively put Pyongyang on notice when he branded North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, part of an “axis of evil” in early 2002.

Washington has made great play of the “threat” posed by North Korean nuclear weapons, which, if they exist at all, are vastly outnumbered by the massive US nuclear arsenal. But it continues to sanction its own use of nuclear weapons. In March last year, portions of the Pentagon’s “Nuclear Posture Review,” which were leaked to the press, revealed that the US was prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* gives no political support whatsoever to the Pyongyang regime, North Korea has every right to arm itself, including with nuclear weapons, against the Bush administration’s military threats. As in the case of Iraq, North Korea’s alleged weapons of mass destruction are nothing but a pretext for Washington’s aggressive stance. North Korea does not have vast reserves of oil and gas, but its strategic location in North East Asia makes it a particularly useful vehicle for Washington to justify a military presence and assert its hegemony in the region, particularly against China.

Washington’s focus at present is on a provocative military blockade. But, as Perle’s comments make clear, if it fails to achieve its objectives through that method, the Bush administration is prepared to use direct military force.



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