

A provocative step towards a US-led military blockade of North Korea

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Amid escalating tensions over North Korea, a second meeting of the 11-nation group, known as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), decided last week on a provocative new step towards setting up a military blockade of the small North East Asian country. The gathering in Australia on July 9-10 unanimously agreed on a series of joint military exercises designed to “enhance the capabilities of PSI nations to conduct actual air, ground and naval interdictions”.

While the final statement was couched in general terms, no one is in any doubt that North Korea is at the top of the list of potential targets. The Bush administration has been building up the pressure on Pyongyang since rejecting North Korean proposals to end the current standoff over its nuclear programs at a Chinese-sponsored meeting in late April. One of the means has been the threat of a military blockade, on the basis of unsubstantiated claims that North Korea would sell nuclear materials to terrorist groups—something Pyongyang has never threatened to do.

President Bush first called for the Proliferation Security Initiative during a speech in Poland in May in order to legitimise what previously has been regarded as piracy or an act of war—the interception of ships on the high seas or aircraft in international airspace. Eager to appease Washington following sharp differences over the Iraq war, the major European powers agreed to the proposal at the G-8 summit in early June. The PSI group, which includes the US, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, Portugal and the Netherlands as well as Japan and Australia, met in Madrid on June 12 and agreed to take steps to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

However, despite agreement “in principle,” there has been a reluctance on the part of Washington’s partners to press ahead with the proposal—against North Korea in particular. The most obvious reason is the danger of a blockade escalating into a war on the Korean Peninsula that could also embroil China, Japan and other powers. Pyongyang has repeatedly declared that it would regard any attempt to intercept its ships and planes as an act of war and take retaliatory action.

Japan, the only East Asian country involved in the PSI, has expressed concerns about mounting a blockade. South Korea declined to become a PSI member and publicly warned against provoking North Korea. When Australian Foreign Minister

Downer suggested that Beijing should become involved, a Chinese spokesman in Canberra politely pointed out that China was pursuing other avenues. None of the European countries has pushed for action against North Korea.

Prior to the PSI meeting, even Australia, which has been one of the most ardent supporters of the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism,” expressed caution. The Howard government was keen to host the meeting, to demonstrate yet again its loyalty to Washington and to bolster its prominence within the Asian region. However, Downer and Defence Minister Robert Hill both emphasised to the media that Canberra had no immediate plans to commit Australian ships to a US-led interception force.

Downer also pointed out that a new international convention would be needed to permit any interception in international waters or airspace. But, as it has done in other areas of international law, Washington is proposing to tear up long-established principles. The UN Law of the Sea Convention, guarantees free passage on the high seas for properly flagged ships [or in international air space for aircraft] and allows for interception only in exceptional circumstances where piracy, slavery or unauthorised broadcasting is suspected.

A more aggressive note was sounded after the arrival of the head of the US delegation—Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton. Bolton, who is closely aligned with the rightwing Pentagon leadership, told the *Australian* that he expected the PSI meeting to quickly lead to agreed “operational” plans to intercept North Korean ships and planes. He insisted such steps were permitted under international law and indicated Washington’s willingness to proceed immediately.

While the details of the proceedings were not made public, there is no doubt that Bolton attempted to lay down the law. The final statement went far further in implementing a military blockade than Washington’s partners had indicated prior to the meeting. The 11 nations agreed to “move quickly on direct, practical measures” against trade in weapons of mass destruction. Joint naval training exercises are scheduled to take place as early as September in the Pacific, the Mediterranean and elsewhere. But, while Bolton expressed satisfaction with the outcome, it fell short of what he had been pushing for.

Despite the unanimous vote, divisions began to surface after the meeting. The Australian government shifted its stance to line up more closely with Washington. Prime Minister Howard left for a tour of the Philippines, Japan and South Korea declaring that North Korea was a “rogue state” which presented “a huge challenge”. He insisted that the planned naval exercises were not simply “a ploy to send a warning shot to the North Koreans” but were designed to “effectively gather an interception force, if that’s what we ultimately decide to do.”

But Howard’s efforts to consolidate support in Japan and South Korea for tough measures against North Korea have fallen on deaf ears. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi told Howard on Wednesday that while Japan had adopted “a positive approach” in the PSI talks, his government refused to back plans for a military blockade. Japan has put on hold proposals for economic sanctions against North Korea, pending the outcome of a top-level Chinese delegation to Pyongyang this week. Deeply concerned at the danger of escalating tensions, Beijing is attempting to strong-arm North Korea into accepting Washington’s demand for multilateral talks.

North Korea has repeatedly offered to negotiate an end to its nuclear programs with Washington in return for a non-aggression pact guaranteeing the country’s security. But the Bush administration has denounced the proposal as “blackmail” and refused to engage in bilateral talks. Instead, the US has demanded “multilateral negotiations” involving North Korea’s neighbours, calculating that it can exploit such a forum to marshal support from South Korea, Japan and China for punitive measures if Pyongyang refuses to agree to US demands.

Pyongyang has every reason to believe that Washington’s real target is not North Korea’s nuclear program but the regime itself. Implicit in Bush’s declaration in 2002 that North Korea formed an “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and Iran, was the notion that negotiations with, or even recognition of, the regime were impermissible. Since last October, Washington has steadily ratcheted up the pressure on Pyongyang after US officials claimed North Korea admitted to having a secret uranium enrichment program. In March, the Pentagon stationed 24 long-range bombers on Guam, within striking distance of North Korea, and dispatched stealth aircraft to bolster US forces in South Korea.

In the wake of the Iraq war, Pyongyang appears to have concluded, quite legitimately, that the only means of keeping the US at bay is to develop nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible. After all, none of the attempts by the Saddam Hussein regime to prove that it had no weapons of mass destruction stopped the relentless build up of US troops in the Middle East and the eventual invasion of Iraq. Since January, North Korea has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Agreement, expelled international weapons inspectors, restarted its small nuclear research reactor at Yongbyon and, if US and South Korean intelligence agencies are to be believed, begun

reprocessing spent fuel rods to extract plutonium and testing nuclear trigger devices.

The steps towards a US-military blockade have provoked sharp concerns in American ruling circles over the potentially explosive consequences of such an action, particularly when US military forces are bogged down in an increasingly unpopular occupation in Iraq. Former US defence secretary William Perry warned in an interview with the *Washington Post* that the US and North Korea were “drifting towards war, perhaps as early as this year, in an increasingly dangerous standoff”.

Perry, who presided over the Clinton administration’s plans in 1993 to strike North Korean nuclear facilities, has no fundamental disagreement with the Bush administration’s stance. But, he made a scathing attack on the incoherence of the current policy and Washington’s refusal to enter negotiations with North Korea in good faith. “I’m damned if I can figure out what the policy is,” he declared, adding that the plan for a blockade “would be provocative, but it would not be effective”.

As Perry pointed out, the interception of North Korean ships and planes would be unlikely to prevent the export of small quantities of plutonium or other nuclear material—if Pyongyang chose to do so. But for the most rightwing sections of the Bush administration, the purpose of any military blockade is not simply to search for weapons of mass destruction. It is to choke off North Korea’s limited exports and precipitate an economic and political collapse as part of broader strategic plans for US domination in North East Asia.

Despite Washington’s rhetoric about North Korea’s “illicit” trade in weapons of mass destruction, the chief target of any military blockade would be North Korea’s sale of ballistic missiles—estimated to be worth between \$US1-2 billion a year. Washington tacitly admitted that the missile trade was completely legal when it released a North Korean freighter intercepted by US and Spanish warships in the Arabian Sea last December. To the embarrassment of Washington, Yemen, a US ally against Iraq, claimed the cargo of 15 Scud missiles, insisted that they had been purchased legally and called for the ship to be let go.

No final decision has been taken on the establishment of a military blockade, but, as Perry’s warning underscores, the moves to establish one have a logic of their own. By threatening North Korea with economic strangulation and offering no alternative but complete capitulation to US demands, the Bush administration is recklessly heightening the dangers of military conflict, with catastrophic consequences.



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