South Korea admits to carrying out secret nuclear experiments

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South Korea's confession last week that its nuclear scientists secretly conducted experiments into uranium enrichment in 2000 has served to highlight the rank hypocrisy surrounding the Bush administration's stance on the proliferation of so-called weapons of mass destruction.

It does not require a great deal of imagination to surmise Washington's response if North Korea or Iran made similar admissions. The White House has previously seized on any evidence of uranium enrichment programs to accuse the countries of building nuclear weapons and to threaten retaliatory action. As for Iraq, its non-existent nuclear weapons program constituted a major element of the Bush administration's justification for the invasion and neo-colonial subjugation of the country.

It is quite different, however, with South Korea, a long-standing strategic US ally in North East Asia. Seoul publicly acknowledged last Thursday that scientists at a government research centre had conducted a series of experiments over several months in early 2000 that enriched small amounts of uranium. Foreign Ministry spokesman Oh Joon played down the tests as a "one-off event", declaring: "South Korea has never had, and does not have, enrichment or nuclear reprocessing programs, let alone a weaponisation program."

The government and South Korean media followed a similar line insisting that the experiments had been conducted by a "rogue" group of scientists without government support or knowledge. Chang In Soon, president of the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute, told the media that government scientists had enriched an amount of uranium "smaller than a sesame seed" merely "to satisfy their curiosity". "Some misunderstood this experiment as a step to build nuclear weapons, but atomic energy experts would probably laugh at such claims," he said.

At this stage, South Korean authorities have divulged very little information about the experiments. The media has not been allowed into the research facility at Taejon, about 160 kilometres south of Seoul. Officials claim that just 0.2 grams of enriched uranium were produced using a laser technique. Reports vary as to the level of enrichment achieved—from 10 percent to nearly 80 percent. The latter is just short of the grade required to manufacture a nuclear weapon.

What is clear, however, is that South Korea has breached the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which does not ban uranium enrichment but does require that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) be informed. The claims that the tests were carried out without official approval or simply out of curiosity are simply not credible. As spokesman Oh Joon admitted, there is an official ban on such activities, of which all scientists involved would have been well aware.

Washington was quick to dismiss the revelations. US State Department Richard Boucher declared that the experiments "should not have happened" but then added: "I would say that South Korea has voluntarily reported this activity. They are co-operating fully and proactively in order to demonstrate that the activity has been eliminated and it is no longer cause for concern."

All the indications are, however, that the confession was far from "voluntary". According to the *International Herald Tribune*, IAEA inspectors had begun asking pointed questions about a particular piece of equipment at the Taejon research institute that they had been barred from visiting. "It became clear to the South Koreans that there would be environmental samples taken, and the truth would be discovered. So they decided they'd better disclose it first themselves," a diplomat told the newspaper.

Even if this were not the case, South Korea was obviously concerned about the implications of the IAEA's Additional Protocol which it signed in February.

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The new measures, which were implemented at Washington's insistence and aimed primarily against Iran, provide for far more intrusive inspections of nuclear facilities at short notice. South Korea reportedly made a formal disclosure to the IAEA on August 23. A team of IAEA inspectors has just completed a visit to the country.

The disclosure raises a number of questions about South Korea's nuclear plans. The claim by South Korean spokesman Oh Joon that the country "never had" nuclear enrichment, reprocessing or weapons programs is simply false. In the early 1970s, the country's military dictator, President Park Chung-Hee, concerned at the implications of the US defeat in Vietnam and Washington's rapprochement with China, established a program to build nuclear weapons. The regime negotiated with France to build a nuclear fuel reprocessing facility and sought to procure material, equipment and expertise through US civilian and military channels.

Under pressure from Washington, Park eventually agreed in 1975 to halt the program in return for a US pledge to stop further US troop withdrawals from South Korea. However, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute website: "In the late 1970s reports surfaced that the South continued to pursue this program clandestinely. An opposition lawmaker Kang Chang Sung stated that in 1978 President Park told him that the country's nuclear weapons program was approximately 95 percent complete."

If the reports so far are accurate, it is unlikely that the experiments in isolation were part of a program to build nuclear weapons. The use of lasers to enrich uranium has so far proven to be cumbersome and expensive. But the fact that the tests were kept secret for four years does pose the obvious question: what other nuclear research is underway? South Korea already has an extensive nuclear power industry, which produces about 40 percent of the country's electricity requirements—one of the highest in the world. It thus has considerable scientific expertise and, if an enrichment or reprocessing facility were established, to large amounts of the fissionable material required to make nuclear weapons.

South Korea's revelations can only add to the tensions in the region. While it is yet to make a public statement, North Korea can legitimately point to Washington's double standards in dealing with respective breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by Seoul and Pyongyang. South Korea's nuclear experiments will only lead to further distrust in North Korea and add to the danger of a regional nuclear arms race.

Reflecting concerns in Japanese ruling circles, an *Asahi Shimbun* editorial described the news from South Korea as "shocking" and the official explanation as "not convincing". The newspaper pointed out that the disclosure could undermine the next round of six-nation talks in Beijing that are aimed at pressuring North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs. "Some in Japan have suggested that Japan should possess nuclear weapons," it warned. "We fear that such an attitude will strengthen on the news of the South Korean experiment."

The issue is likely to be discussed at an IAEA board meeting scheduled for September 13. The Bush administration has been seeking to make Tehran's alleged non-compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty the basis for referring Iran to the UN Security Council for the imposition of sanctions. The US will no doubt press ahead with these plans while at the same time arguing that South Korea's experiments do not warrant any punitive actions.

In other words, whether or not a country is branded as a "nuclear threat" is determined not so much by their nuclear programs but by the interests of US imperialism. Washington has targetted Iran and North Korea, declaring them to be part of an "axis of evil, because these countries represent an obstacle to its ambitions in the Middle East and North East Asia. India, Pakistan and Israel have all developed nuclear weapons yet the US has taken little or no action against these American allies.

The greatest impetus for a nuclear arms race is presented by the US itself, which has the largest arsenal of nuclear bombs in the world and the declared intention of building new, more sophisticated weapons. The Bush administration's subjugation of Afghanistan and Iraq can only lead North Korea, Iran and others to conclude that nuclear weaponry is essential if they are to defend themselves against future US aggression.

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