

US steps up provocations against North Korea

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The Bush administration has put North Korea back on the agenda with a series of provocative statements over the last fortnight designed to heighten tensions in North East Asia.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan set the ball rolling on April 18, declaring that the US could take North Korea to the UN Security Council, with unspecified punitive consequences, if it failed to resume six-party talks over its nuclear programs. While not setting any timetable, McClellan warned: “[I]f they refuse to come back to the talks then we would have to consult our partners and look at the next steps.”

Just days later, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeated the warning in an interview with “Fox News”. After pointedly reminding Pyongyang that the US had “a very strong military alliance on the Korean peninsula,” she added: “Now we reserve the right and the possibility of going to the Security Council... [and] of putting other measures in place, should it be necessary.”

On April 23, as US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill was about to fly to Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo, Washington further inflamed the situation with unsubstantiated claims that North Korea might be preparing to conduct a nuclear test. Unnamed US officials told the *Washington Post* that spy satellites had observed “increased activity at missile sites and other places that could be used for underground tests.” However, even these anonymous officials were compelled to admit that the “evidence” was “open to interpretation”.

As well as provoking North Korea, the allegations were aimed at putting pressure on South Korea, which publicly rejected UN Security Council action against Pyongyang. The claim came in the midst of a top-level meeting between the two Koreas aimed at smoothing relations. Alarmed at the possibility of a nuclear test, South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon warned North Korea that exploding a nuclear device would further isolate the country and endanger its future.

Not surprisingly, the US threats drew an angry response from North Korea. On April 25, an official foreign ministry statement repeated a previous warning that Pyongyang would regard any UN sanctions as “a declaration of war”, adding: “We are fully ready to cope with everything in a do-or-die spirit and have already prepared all countermeasures against the sanctions.”

Throughout last week, Washington continued to aggravate the situation. On Thursday Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, director of the Defence Intelligence Agency told a Senate Committee that North Korea now had the ability to arm missiles with nuclear weapons—again without any evidence. While the Pentagon played down the claim, the statement had the desired effect—a flurry of media headlines warning that Pyongyang was able hit the US with nuclear-tipped missiles.

On the same day, US President George Bush repeated his litany of denunciations of North Korea, declaring: “Kim Jong Il is a dangerous person. He’s a man who starves his people. He’s got huge

concentration camps... There is concern about his capacity to deliver a nuclear weapon. We don’t know if he can or not, but I think it’s best when you’re dealing with a tyrant like Kim Jong Il to assume he can.”

The condemnation of Kim Jong Il produced an expected response. Pyongyang lashed out at Bush describing him as “a half-baked man in terms of morality and a philistine whom we can never deal with”. The official statement denounced the US president as the “world’s dictator” who had “turned the world into a sea of blood”. In a rather empty show of bravado, North Korea test fired a short-range missile into the neighbouring sea on Sunday—a move that the White House described rather hypocritically as “provocative”.

The Bush administration’s deliberate stoking up of tensions with North Korea followed a well-worn pattern—a series of statements and comments, often anonymously leaked to the press, containing sensational but unverified allegations about weapons of mass destruction and thinly veiled threats. All of this was designed to heighten public fears in the US and create a climate of opinion for aggressive new moves by Washington.

In particular, the latest diplomatic salvo was timed to coincide with the opening on Monday of an international conference at the UN headquarters in New York to review the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). According to a *New York Times* article last Friday, the White House plans to call for a resolution criticising North Korea for its nuclear program and demanding its return to six-party talks.

By focussing on North Korea as well as Iran, the Bush administration is also seeking to divert attention from its own violations of the treaty. A central aspect of the NPT was that in exchange for guarantees from non-nuclear countries not to pursue weapons programs, the five recognised nuclear-armed states, including the US, agreed to dismantle their nuclear stockpiles. At the last five-year review in 2000, the nuclear powers gave their “unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.”

Since it took office in 2001, the Bush administration has not only made clear that it intends to hang on its nuclear weapons, but has initiated the development of a new range of nuclear battlefield weapons, including nuclear devices aimed at destroying heavily-protected underground bunkers. The 2000 review also endorsed the maintenance of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the ratification of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, both of which have been repudiated by Bush.

In the *New York Times* on May 1, Graham Allison, a nuclear analyst at Harvard, commented: “The administration wants to use the meeting to point to Iran and North Korea, and much of the rest of the world wants to use it to say that the Bush administration has flagrantly flouted its own responsibilities.”

The Bush administration’s stance underscores the two-faced character of its condemnations of North Korea and Iran. The US

unashamedly seeks to maintain its own unchallengeable military predominance, including so-called weapons of mass destruction, and to use its military might to menace and, in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, subjugate other countries. Washington turns a blind eye to the nuclear arsenals of the three “unofficial” nuclear powers—India, Pakistan and Israel—and their refusal to sign the NPT.

But when North Korea, which Bush has branded along with Iran as part of an “axis of evil”, responds to US provocations by withdrawing from the NPT, restarting its nuclear programs and makes claims, as yet unverified, to have a tiny number of nuclear devices, it is denounced as a rogue state, a terrorist threat and a danger to world peace.

While there is no justification for giving any political support to the repressive Pyongyang regime, the small backward country of North Korea has every right to arm itself against repeated US threats. It is worth recalling that until the late 1990s, the US maintained a store of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea for use against North Korea. There is no reason to believe that the Pentagon has since ruled out the use of its huge stockpile of nuclear bombs in the event of conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Washington’s official policy of disarming North Korea through six-party talks has stalled. The Bush administration never had any intention of negotiating in good faith with North Korea, which offered to dismantle its nuclear programs in return for security assurances and economic assistance. Rather, the purpose was to enlist the support of the four other powers—Japan, China, Russia and South Korea—to force Pyongyang to accept US terms or face joint punitive measures.

No talks have taken place since last June. In February, Pyongyang again refused to take part in talks and declared that it had “manufactured nukes for self-defence”. In early April, North Korea shut its small nuclear research reactor at Yongbyon, prompting speculation that it was preparing to unload spent fuel rods and extract plutonium to construct more.

The latest White House threats to take action in the UN Security Council indicate that the shift to a more US aggressive policy is being considered in Washington. To date, the US has not officially spelled out what sanctions it would seek in the UN. However, a *New York Times* article on April 25 indicated that the Bush administration is actively discussing a plan to seek UN endorsement for a blockade of North Korea.

Such a resolution would put the onus on China to cut or limit its trade with North Korea, on which Pyongyang relies for vital food and oil supplies. Even if food and other basic goods were excluded from such a “quarantine”, Chinese trade restrictions would inevitably deepen North Korea’s economic crisis and thus the hardships faced by the population.

A UN embargo would also legitimise the US-sponsored Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—a plan to forcibly intercept ships or aircraft suspected of carrying so-called weapons of mass destruction. The PSI, which was launched in 2003 in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, involves the US, Australia, Japan and a number of European nations. Last October, a joint PSI anti-weapons smuggling exercise was pointedly staged in Japanese waters producing a sharp reaction from Pyongyang. North Korea has been one of the unstated targets of the plan from the outset.

One of Washington’s reasons for seeking UN approval is to justify another breach of a long-established legal principle—the freedom of the high seas. 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. The illegal boarding of ships and seizure of cargo has in the past been considered an act of war.

A senior administration official told the *New York Times* that “the quarantine option” had not yet been presented to Bush, but left no doubt as to his views. “They [North Korea] are heading toward a full nuclear breakout, so that we are forced to deal with them as an established nuclear power, or they are putting on quite a show for our satellites,” he declared. The article confirmed that “the quarantine idea has been pressed by the Pentagon and members of Vice President Dick Cheney’s staff,” who have never supported the six-party talks.

Vice President Cheney effectively scuttled a round of negotiations due to be held in December 2003, by vetoing a draft statement of principles prepared by the US State Department. According to an article in *Knight Ridder* newspapers at the time, he reportedly told a meeting of top US officials: “I have been charged by the president with making sure that none of the tyrannies in the world are negotiated with. We don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.”

US denunciations of “evil” Pyongyang have nothing to do with any concern over the lack of democratic rights or the economic privations of North Koreans. Confronting economic challenges from its European and Asian rivals, the US has repeatedly played the North Korean card to stir up tensions in North East Asia as a means of reasserting its hegemony over the region. While it has no significant reserves of raw materials, North Korea does occupy a key strategic position, immediately adjacent to Japan, China, Russia and South Korea.

The Bush administration is well aware that North Korea has threatened to respond to any blockade as an act of war. That will not stop it from pursuing an aggressive policy that has the potential to trigger military conflict in what has historically been one of the most hotly contested and volatile areas of the globe.



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