

Bush administration intensifies pressure on North Korea

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Further signs are emerging that the US is moving toward a more aggressive stance over North Korea. While there are internal differences over timing and tactics, the Bush administration has taken a series of new steps to isolate and menace Pyongyang over its nuclear programs.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reaffirmed on Monday that Washington remained committed to restarting six-party talks on North Korea, dismissing comments by an unnamed senior US defence official on Sunday that the US was about to take the issue to the UN Security Council. She did not, however, completely rule out the possibility, instead describing the remarks as “a little forward-leaning”. She declared that no timetable had been set.

Rice and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld both played down the issue, but there is no doubt that Washington is contemplating tougher action against North Korea. In mid-April, Rice publicly reminded Pyongyang that the US had “a very strong alliance on the Korean peninsula” and warned that the US “reserved the right and the possibility of going to the Security Council” if North Korea failed to return to six-party talks.

The six-party talks, which include China, Japan, South Korea and Russia as well as the US and North Korea, have been stalled since last June. North Korea has responded to US efforts to compel it to dismantle its nuclear facilities in return for minimal economic and security guarantees by refusing to take part in the discussions. In February, Pyongyang declared publicly for the first time that it had “manufactured nukes for self-defence”—a claim that the US seized upon in April to accuse North Korea of preparing to carry out a nuclear test.

From the outset, the Bush administration has refused to hold bilateral negotiations with North Korea. It has also rejected Pyongyang’s offer to freeze its nuclear program in return for a non-aggression pact guaranteeing its security and normalising economic and diplomatic relations. Washington’s aim in insisting on multilateral talks has been as much to pressure other participants, particularly China, into taking harsh measures against North Korea, as it has been to bully Pyongyang.

However, while pushing North Korea to return to talks, China has refused to support any economic blockade against its ally and extended its investment from \$1.3 million in 2003 to \$200 million last year. South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun has sought to continue the so-called Sunshine policy of his predecessor—offering economic concessions to North Korea in return for it opening up as a cheap labour platform.

These measures cut across US attempts to isolate North Korea. Even if Washington were to scrap the six-party talks and proceed to the UN Security Council, there is no guarantee, at this stage, that Beijing, or for that matter the other major powers, would back economic or military action against Pyongyang. For its part, the North Korean regime has repeatedly declared that it would regard an economic blockade as an act of war and would react accordingly.

The current impasse has fuelled tensions within the Bush administration. While there is general agreement to ratchet up the pressure on North Korea, the so-called Pentagon hawks are clearly impatient with the diplomatic approach of Rice and the State Department. The unnamed “senior defence official,” who told a group of reporters on Sunday that a decision on UN Security Council action was imminent, was accompanying Rumsfeld to a security conference in Singapore and obviously had his tacit support.

Rumsfeld made an oblique reference to the threat in his conference speech, which focussed on criticising China for its military spending. He urged Beijing to put more pressure on Pyongyang to return to the six-party talks, adding that the UN may need to decide what to do about North Korea’s nuclear programs. Significantly, in scotching speculation about UN action, Rice also downplayed Rumsfeld’s claims about the Chinese military, declaring that US-Chinese relations were the “best ever”.

Differences were also on display during a CNN interview with Vice President Richard Cheney last week. On May 30, Cheney described North Korea as “a major problem” and dismissively declared: “To date, you know, those [six-party] talks have not produced much.” Then in comments calculated to inflame Pyongyang, Cheney described North Korean leader Kim Jong Il as “one of the world’s most irresponsible leaders”, who runs a police state and does not care about his people. “The vast bulk of the population live in abject poverty and stages of malnutrition,” he said.

The following day, President Bush stepped in to smooth over North Korea’s ruffled feathers, pointedly referring to the North Korean leader as “Mr Kim”. Then, in remarks unmistakably directed at the internal debate, Bush declared: “I see either diplomacy or military, and I am for the diplomacy approach. And so for those who say that we ought to be using our military to solve the problem, I would say that, while all the options are on the table, we’ve got a ways to go to solve this diplomatically.”

That Bush has “a ways to go” diplomatically before endorsing military action against North Korea—a reckless enterprise with potentially catastrophic consequences—is hardly cause for comfort. The Bush administration has already put in place a series of measures aimed at tightening the economic and military noose around North Korea. These include:

* Washington has not as yet indicated whether it will make any contribution this year to the UN’s emergency food aid program for North Korea, despite signs of a growing humanitarian crisis. Last year the US donated 50,000 tonnes. Anthony Banbury, Asia director for the World Food Program, told a press conference in South Korea on May 27 that the UN agency had received only 6 percent of 230,000 tonnes of food needed this year. “What the government is able to provide the people now, these 250 grams a day, is a starvation ration,” he said.

The appalling conditions facing North Koreans underscore the hypocrisy of Cheney’s demagogic criticisms of Kim Jung Il for “starving his people”. While the North Korean regime is obviously repressive, the Bush administration has no more concern for the democratic rights and living conditions of North Koreans, than it does for those of the Iraqi people. The US has maintained economic sanctions against North Korea ever since the 1950-53 Korean War and is now seeking to tighten them, deliberately compounding the country’s deep social and economic crisis.

* According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 1, a group of US officials, known as the Illicit Activities Initiatives, is seeking to choke off North Korea’s alleged trade in counterfeit goods and money. It is part of a wider effort aimed at blocking Pyongyang’s sources of foreign income—legal and “illicit”—including from missile sales. The group’s aims were spelled out by US official Larry Wilkerson, who told the *Wall Street Journal* that the US had to show that “we could severely cut off North Korea’s economic lifeline” if Pyongyang does not return to the negotiating table.

* The Pentagon has suspended its only joint activity with the North Korean military—the recovery of the remains of American servicemen killed during the Korean War. Announcing the decision on May 25, US military spokesmen cited concerns about the security of the US recovery teams in conditions of rising tensions over North Korea’s nuclear programs. As well as cutting off a source of foreign exchange, the decision clears an obstacle to any military strike—an implication that will not be missed in Pyongyang.

* The Bush administration failed to appoint a successor to Charles Kartman as head of Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation. The organisation was charged with carrying out the construction of a lightwater nuclear power reactor in North Korea—an element of the 1994 Agreed Framework under which Pyongyang agreed to shut down and allow international monitoring of its nuclear facilities. The Republican Party rightwing repeatedly denounced the deal as an unpardonable concession to North Korea.

As soon as it came to office in 2001, the Bush administration immediately froze relations with North Korea. In October 2002, Washington used the alleged admission by Pyongyang that it had a secret uranium enrichment program to scuttle the Agreed

Framework and end supplies of fuel oil to North Korea. Construction of the lightwater reactor, which was barely started, even though it was due to be completed by 2003, ground to a halt. While the US is not in a position to unilaterally terminate the project, it has, one commentator put it, “essentially decapitating it by getting rid of Kartman”.

* On May 27, the Pentagon confirmed that 15 F-117A stealth fighter-bombers had been sent to South Korea, claiming they were part of a long-planned training exercise with South Korean forces. Regardless of the pretext, the presence of warplanes in South Korea capable of evading radar and air defences is obviously designed to menace North Korea. The F-117A was used extensively in bombing Iraqi infrastructure in 2003. Pyongyang denounced the decision as “a risky prelude to war” and called for the withdrawal of the fighters.

Taken together, these measures are clearly aimed at putting North Korea under intense pressure. Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, L. George Flake, head of Mansfield Centre for Pacific Studies in Washington, commented: “The US is shutting down anything that is in any way remotely beneficial to North Korea.” He described the US decisions as “gearing up for the next phase” in the event that six-party talks fail. A former US State Department official told the newspaper: “They are putting all the pieces in place to shut everything down around North Korea.”

Some indications emerged this week that North Korea might be prepared to attend a new round of talks. The US State Department reported that US officials met in New York on Monday with North Korean representatives to the UN. Even if six-party negotiations are reconvened, however, there is little chance of agreement as the US insists on what amounts to North Korea’s complete capitulation: the “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement”—“CVID” for short—of all its nuclear programs.

Despite Bush’s rather empty public declarations of support for this diplomacy, the US has taken a series of measures that can only heighten tensions in North East Asia and increase the danger of conflict.



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