

North Korean “missile crisis”—another example of unbridled US militarism

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The belligerent response in Washington to a possible North Korean missile test has provided another graphic example of the way in which militarism and the manipulation of public fears play a central role in official American politics.

Although evidence that North Korea was preparing for a missile test was known from satellite photographs for weeks, the Bush administration only chose to leak the news to the press in mid-June. When the story finally hit the headlines on June 15, American officials and the media claimed that the North Korean rocket posed a new and dangerous threat to the US. The new Taepodong-2 ballistic missile, it was alleged, would be capable of reaching US territory in Alaska and perhaps Hawaii.

Washington has accused North Korea of breaching a moratorium forced on it by the Clinton administration in 1999 following the launching of a Taepodong-1 missile over Japan into Pacific Ocean. North Korea has not publicly confirmed that a missile test is imminent but has insisted on its right to defend itself in the face of the Bush administration’s persistent aggressive stance toward the country.

The empty and rather reckless posturing of the North Korean regime, including its claims to have built nuclear weapons, has played directly into the hands of the Bush administration. But even if all of Pyongyang’s claims were true, this small, economically backward country poses no genuine military threat to the US, which is armed to the teeth with a massive nuclear arsenal.

Significantly, Washington made no comment on India’s launch on June 11 of a short-range Prithvi 1 ballistic missile, which is capable of carrying a nuclear payload. India and Pakistan—US allies—have both tested medium to long-range ballistic missiles in the past. None of these tests has provoked condemnation, let alone a harsher reaction, from the US despite the obvious danger of the continuing arms race between these two bitter regional rivals.

The possibility of a North Korean missile test, however, has led to immediate threats by the US and Japan of diplomatic and economic reprisals. On June 19, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice publicly denounced Pyongyang, declaring any missile test would be a “provocative act” and demanding that it abide by the 1999 moratorium. Washington and Tokyo have threatened to refer North Korea to the UN Security Council for the imposition of economic sanctions if the missile is launched.

The same day the Bush administration deliberately heightened tensions by hinting at an aggressive military response. US defence officials leaked to the right-wing *Washington Times* that the

Pentagon had for the first time activated its previously experimental anti-ballistic missile system. Eleven US interceptor missiles based in Alaska and California had been switched into operation mode and two US Aegis warships with sophisticated sensors capable of tracking a missile flight had been dispatched to waters near North Korea.

The Pentagon downplayed suggestions by unnamed officials that the US might shoot down the North Korean missile. Nonetheless it did not rule out the possibility that Washington would resort to what can only be described as a reckless act of war in response to a missile test that breaches no international law. Once again, the Bush administration’s response is a militarist one: to ratchet up the crisis and threaten unilateral military aggression.

The North Korean “missile crisis” serves a number of purposes for the Bush administration.

* First of all it again sends a menacing threat not only to its other targets, such as Iran, but also to its European and Asian rivals, that it will not hesitate to use military force to achieve its ambition of global supremacy. The threat against North Korea comes in the aftermath of a diplomatic setback for the US over Iran. Washington has been forced to reluctantly agree to European proposals for negotiations with Iran, after Russia and China blocked a more aggressive UN resolution.

* The missile test has also provided a convenient pretext for activating the controversial anti-ballistic missile system. The Bush administration has pursued this project in spite of international protests after unilaterally withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with Russia in December 2001. While Washington has always maintained that its ABM system is purely defensive—part of its bogus “global war on terrorism”—the construction of an effective missile defence would obviously enhance the Pentagon’s ability to launch a preemptive nuclear strike without fear of reprisal.

* The missile crisis also serves obvious domestic political purposes. Whipping up a climate of fear and panic over the alleged dangers of North Korea is a useful distraction, in the lead up to mid-term Congressional elections in November, to the deepening quagmire in Iraq and allows the Bush administration to posture once again as the most determined prosecutor of the “war on terror”.

The right-wing media immediately clambered on board the bandwagon. In an opinion piece on June 21, the *Wall Street Journal* urged the Bush administration to respond by “blowing the

Korean provocation out of the sky” as a demonstration to the world of US military might. “Knocking the missile out of the sky, or even trying to, would tell the North that it can’t succeed with such tactics. It would also reassure Japan and other US allies that we have the will to protect them from rogue madmen. The demonstration effect would be useful around the world, not least in Iran,” it declared.

The most significant article, however, came not from the right-wing supporters of the Bush administration, but rather from its so-called critics aligned to the Democratic Party. In an article in the *Washington Post* on June 22, William Perry and Ashton Carter, former defence secretary and assistant defence secretary under Clinton, went one step further, arguing that the US could not afford to wait for the North Korean missile to be launched but should blow it up on the launch pad. In an obvious attempt to outdo Bush on the “war on terror”, Perry declared that a cruise missile from a US submarine would destroy the missile with a “blast [that] would be similar to the one that killed terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq”.

Perry is well aware of the implications of such an attack. As defence secretary under Clinton, he was intimately involved in the preparations for US air strikes on North Korea’s nuclear facilities in 1994 after Pyongyang refused to accept US ultimatums to dismantle its nuclear programs. In the event, the Clinton administration backed away from a full-scale war on and brokered a deal with North Korea to end the crisis.

In October 2002, amid escalating tensions over North Korea’s nuclear programs, Perry and Carter wrote a rather different article for the *Washington Post*, encouraging the Bush administration to negotiate. They warned of the consequences of war and cited the military estimates made in 1994. “Thousands of US troops and tens of thousands of South Korean troops would be killed, and millions of refugees would crowd the highways. North Korean losses would be even higher. The intensity of combat would be greater than any the world has witnessed since the last Korean War.”

Four years later, Perry and Carter are prepared to recklessly plunge North East Asia into such a cauldron of war. In their article last week, they declared: “North Korea could respond to US resolve by taking the drastic step of threatening all-out war on the Korean Peninsula. But it is unlikely to act on that threat... An invasion of South Korea would bring about the certain end of Kim Jong Il’s regime within a few bloody weeks of war, as surely he knows. Though war is unlikely, it would be prudent for the United States to enhance deterrence by introducing US air and naval forces into the region at the same time it made its threat to strike the Taepodong. If North Korea opted for such a suicidal course, these extra forces would make its defeat swifter and less costly in lives...”

The article demonstrates that “preemptive war” is not just the policy of the Bush administration but of the entire US political establishment. Perry, who was a foreign policy adviser for Democratic contender John Kerry during 2004 presidential campaign, speaks for the leadership of the Democratic Party, which is determined to take a more militaristic stance than the White House in the lead up to the mid-term Congressional

elections. On North Korea, as on Iran, their criticism of Bush is that he has failed to take a more aggressive stand.

The target of Washington’s sabre-rattling is not so much North Korea, but China. Senior US officials have in recent months heightened the pressure on Beijing over trade and currency issues as well as the alleged threat of its military arsenal. The annual Pentagon report on China released in May took a markedly more antagonistic position. Regardless of Perry’s assurances that a war with North Korea is unlikely and would in any case be brief, any conflict on the strategic Korean peninsula carries the obvious danger of a broader conflagration.

Despite Beijing’s attempts to defuse the latest crisis and its broader efforts to reach a negotiated deal over North Korea’s nuclear programs, Washington continues to be highly provocative. In the midst of the current tensions, the Pentagon has proceeded with its largest naval exercises since the end of the Vietnam War. Three US aircraft carrier groups engaged in manoeuvres known as “Valiant Shield” from June 19-23 near Guam in the West Pacific. A Chinese delegation was invited for the first time to watch this massive display of US military firepower, involving 30 warships, 280 aircraft and 22,000 troops.

While China and South Korea have sought to downplay the North Korean missile test, the Japanese government has, like the Bush administration, deliberately heightened tensions. Japanese foreign minister Taro Aso declared on Sunday that “all options are on the table,” including the imposition of severe economic sanctions against Pyongyang. Aso, who is notorious for his belligerent comments on North Korea and China, has hinted at a military response. While telling Asahi TV on June 18 that there would be no immediate “appeal to arms”, he did not rule out the possibility.

Under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Japan, with US backing, has adopted a far more aggressive role in the region and deliberately stirred up antagonism to China and North Korea as a means for reviving Japanese militarism. The North Korea missile is a useful pretext for furthering this agenda. Japan is already involved in the joint development of an anti-ballistic missile system with the US. And while Tokyo and Washington are both evasive on the issue of military action, the US has indicated that it plans to speed up the deployment of advanced Patriot interceptor missiles on US bases in Japan for the first time.

Whether or not North Korea actually fires its missile, the incident underscores the explosive tensions in the region. The greatest threat of war in North East Asia, as in other parts of the world, comes not from North Korea’s rudimentary missile capacity, but from the strategy of the US ruling class as it seeks to offset its declining global economic and political influence through the unilateral use of its residual military might.



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