US and Japan seize on missile tests to tighten noose around North Korea

Peter Symonds
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In a move that plays directly into the hands of the Bush administration, the North Korean regime test-fired seven missiles yesterday—six short-range rockets and its longer-range Taepodong-2 ballistic missile. Washington and Tokyo immediately condemned the tests and called for an emergency session of the UN Security Council, due to meet today, to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on Pyongyang.

Without waiting for the outcome of the UN debate, the Japanese government has imposed sanctions on North Korea, banning ferry services and charter flights between the two countries and barring visits by North Korean officials. The US and Japan will undoubtedly use the Security Council session to pressure North Korea's neighbours, China in particular, to take action against Pyongyang. For the Bush administration, it is another means to push for tougher measures against Iran, as well as North Korea, at next week's G-8 meeting in St. Petersburg.

The US has already exploited preparations for the tests to place its controversial anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system into "operational" mode. Playing up the potential for the Taepodong-2 to reach the United States, White House officials hinted that the Pentagon might attempt to shoot down the North Korean missile. In the event, Pyongyang's showpiece failed 40 seconds into its flight and fell into the Sea of Japan—a fact that will not stop the push in the US to accelerate the ABM program. The US and Japan have vowed to step up joint efforts to build a missile defence system.

The Bush administration has responded to the missile tests with a hypocritical call for North Korea to return to the stalled six party talks. Beijing sponsored the six-party talks involving the US, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, Japan as well as China, as a means of defusing the escalating confrontation over Pyongyang's nuclear programs. The negotiations began in 2003 and the last round took place in September 2005.

For all its talk about a "diplomatic solution", however, the Bush administration bears the chief responsibility for escalating tensions in North East Asia. It joined the six-party talks, not to reach a compromise deal, but rather as a means for pressuring the other countries into taking tougher economic and diplomatic measures against Pyongyang. Washington has barely disguised the fact that its objective remains "regime change" in North Korea as it was in Iraq, and is in Iran. While White House officials cynically criticise Pyongyang for refusing to attend negotiations, the Bush administration has constantly sought to undermine the talks.

Last September's round of negotiations were widely applauded in the international media as a "breakthrough". North Korea "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs" and to returning "at an early date" to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In return, Washington offered very little—a rather empty promise "not to attack or invade the DPRK [North Korea]" and vague pledges of cooperation and to discuss the provision of a light water power reactor "at an appropriate time".

Actions, as the saying goes, speak louder than words. No sooner had the joint statement been signed than the Bush administration set about undercutting it. In the same month, Washington took the first step in an aggressive campaign to choke off North Korea's access to the international financial system. Alleging that Pyongyang was involved in widespread illicit activities, US Treasury designated the Macau-based bank, Banco Delta Asia, as a primary money laundering concern, accusing it of facilitating "the criminal activities of North Korean government agencies and front companies".

The US has maintained harsh economic sanctions against North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953, but the latest measures are aimed at financially crippling the country by closing off its few sources of foreign exchange. Faced with the threat of US blacklisting, Banco Delta Asia fell into line and in February froze $24 million in North Korean assets. Using the same method, Washington has succeeded in bullying a number of banks and financial institutions in Europe and Asia to end relations with North Korean entities. In April, the Bush administration accused eight state-owned North Korean firms of proliferating weapons of mass destruction and froze their assets in the US.

A Knight Ridder article in May made clear that the US was not concerned whether the targetted financial activities were illicit or not. "It's been a scattershot approach, not a pinpoint attack, and the collateral victims include a group of British bankers who set up a small private bank in North Korea 11 years ago to cater to merchants and importers," the article

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stated. The bank's managing director Nigel Cowie told the reporter: "They are tarring everyone with the same brush, whether they're legal or illegal." He added that humanitarian and UN agencies operating in North Korea were also being hit by the US financial sanctions.

International Crisis Group director for North East Asia, Peter Beck, explained: "The Bush administration has been pleasantly surprised by the effect of the financial sanctions... They will be in place as long as the Bush administration is in office." According to Beck, the South Korean government felt that the US was showing it had "no appetite for further negotiations". South Korea and China have been attempting to restart the six-party talks, which were due to recommence soon after September 2005.

Not surprisingly, North Korea has denounced Washington's financial sanctions as a sign of bad faith and refused to return to the negotiating table until they are lifted. In a rare meeting between US and North Korean officials in March, North Korea's top delegate Li Gun appealed to his counterparts to end the sanctions and offered to take joint measures to address US concerns about counterfeiting and other illicit activities. "We cannot go into the six-party talks with this hat over our head," he reportedly declared. The US rejected the offer.

The Bush administration is not interested in a peaceful resolution to the issue of North Korea's nuclear or missile programs. Its perspective is to crash the North Korean economy, regardless of its impact on the country's population, and precipitate a political crisis that can be exploited to bring about "regime change". Even if North Korea were to finally agree to all US demands on its nuclear programs, Washington would find a new pretext to continue its relentless campaign. Increasingly boxed into a corner, Pyongyang has predictably lashed out by conducting yesterday's missile tests.

While the US is chiefly responsible for the present crisis, the actions of Pyongyang are completely reckless and only invite an aggressive military response from Washington. The autarkic regime headed by Kim Jong-il is not "socialist" or "communist" but rather is based on a mixture of extreme nationalism, Stalinism and Maoism, which has proved to be a complete economic and social disaster for the North Korean people.

Kim's response to Washington's belligerence is invariably the issuing of bloodcurdling threats and a display of bravado. Following a US buildup of warships in waters near North Korea and calls in the US media for action against the pending missile tests, the state-run Korean Central News Agency declared on Monday: "The army and the people of the DPRK are now in full preparedness to answer a pre-emptive attack with a relentless annihilating strike and a nuclear war with a mighty nuclear deterrent."

The suggestion that North Korea armed with a handful of nuclear weapons, which have never been tested and may not even exist, and a long-range ballistic missile is any match for the US military is simply absurd. In fact, far from defending North Korea, the successful demonstration of a nuclear-armed missile would only heighten the danger of a devastating US military strike, to which Pyongyang would have no response. In an article in the *Washington Post* on June 22, William Perry and Ashton Carter, former defence secretary and assistant defence secretary under US President Clinton, openly advocated pre-emptive air strikes to destroy the Taepodong-2 ballistic missile on its launch pad.

Pyongyang's empty bluster is a demonstration of the regime's political bankruptcy. Organically incapable of making any appeal to the international working class, its rhetoric only heightens fear and uncertainty, divides the working people and provides grist to the mill of the most right-wing, nationalist politicians in Japan and South Korea as well as in the US. No one should be under any illusion that North Korea's posturing has anything to do with waging a genuine struggle against imperialism. As the Bush administration is well aware, the missile tests amount to a rather desperate attempt by Pyongyang to normalise its relations with the US—in other words, for a more advantageous relationship with imperialism.

For the US administration, North Korea's actions come as a political godsend, enabling it to whip up a climate of fear and deflect public attention from the deepening quagmire in Iraq and opposition to its domestic policies. As well as pressing for further punitive measures against North Korea, the Bush administration will undoubtedly use the opportunity to ratchet up the diplomatic pressure on China. Washington's objectives in North Korea are not so much economic, but strategic—to add another link in US plans to encircle rival China by establishing bases in and alliances with neighbours. In doing so, it is laying the basis for a far broader conflict.

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