

# US and Japan exploit “missile crisis” to heighten tensions in North East Asia

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With the strong backing of the Bush administration, a Japanese-drafted UN resolution on North Korea’s missile tests last week is further inflaming tensions in North East Asia.

For the first time since the end of World War II, Japan is playing a leading role in a major international crisis. Its draft resolution, submitted to Security Council last Friday, condemns the missile tests as a threat to international peace, demands an immediate end to missile launches and calls for economic sanctions against Pyongyang.

The draft urges member states to “prevent the transfer of financial resources, items, materials, goods and technology to end users that could contribute to DPRK’s [North Korea] missile and other WMD programs.” By invoking Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, the resolution would make sanctions binding and even pave the way for military action. The US has been demanding a similar UN resolution condemning Iran’s nuclear program.

Of the 15 UN Security Council members, 13, including France and Britain, have indicated their willingness to vote in favour. However, China and Russia, which both have a veto, have publicly opposed a binding Chapter 7 resolution and the imposition of sanctions on North Korea. At China’s request, a vote has been delayed in order to allow a Chinese envoy to go to North Korea to press Pyongyang for renewed multilateral negotiations. China and Russia have proposed a non-binding UN Security Council presidential statement on the missile tests.

For all the furore over its missile tests, North Korea has not actually breached any international law. In fact, on Sunday, India tested a new Agni-3 long-range ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and reaching deep into Pakistan or China. Of course, the Bush administration did not denounce New Delhi with which it is seeking a “strategic partnership” as a counterweight against China—a move that is far more of a threat to “world peace” than North Korea’s very limited military capacity.

From the outset, the Bush administration has whipped up fears about North Korea’s missile or nuclear programs, as a means of isolating the Pyongyang regime, and strategically undermining rival powers in the region, particularly China. As Graham Allison, a former US assistant defence secretary under the Clinton administration told the *Financial Times* on July 6: “Bush’s objective is China’s nightmare. Bush wants regime change [in North Korea]. The worst outcome for China is the collapse of a regime that is absorbed by South Korea, creating a US ally on its border.”

On assuming office in 2001, the Bush administration immediately ended Clinton’s moves to open relations with Pyongyang. In 2002, Bush branded North Korea as part of an axis of evil. In 2003, Washington supported “six party” talks, which also included China, Japan, Russia and South Korea, not to negotiate with North Korea, but to pressure the other “partners” to take tough action against Pyongyang. No talks have taken place since last September because of Washington’s provocative efforts to choke off North Korea’s limited international financial activities. Pyongyang has refused to return to the six-party talks until the new sanctions are lifted.

Not surprisingly Japan’s draft has caught Beijing between a rock and a hard place. The Chinese UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, has declared: “If this resolution is put to a vote, definitely there will be no unity in the Security Council.” China cannot simply abandon North Korea, which is a convenient buffer on its northern border. At the same time, Pyongyang’s bellicose words and reckless actions—a rather desperate attempt to gain some political leverage—play directly into the hands of the most right-wing elements in Tokyo and Washington that are pushing for tough sanctions and military action.

Japan, however, has refused to compromise on the resolution. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso told national broadcaster NHK on Sunday: “It would be a mistake to alter the stance for the sake of one country with veto power [China], even though many countries agree.” Commenting on the prospect of China being isolated in the Security Council, Aso told TV Asahi that Beijing should not be backed into a corner. However, that is exactly what Tokyo is doing. Aso also urged Russia to support the resolution, saying it should avoid being isolated at the upcoming G8 summit in St Petersburg.

Within Japan, the “missile crisis” has given further political ammunition to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his government, which, with the backing of the Bush administration, has been taking a more aggressive stance in North East Asia. During his term of office, Koizumi and his allies have been pushing to revise the Japanese constitution and its so-called pacifist clause, have revived symbols of Japanese militarism of the 1930s, and have been aggressively staking out Japan’s claims in neighbouring waters against South Korea and China.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, who is a leading contender to replace Koizumi in September, immediately seized on the missile tests to argue that Japan had to be able to take pre-emptive

strikes against missile launch pads in North Korea. “If we accept that there is no other option to prevent a missile attack,” he said yesterday, “there is an argument that attacking the missile bases would be within the legal right to self-defence.” Abe’s comments came a day after the head of Japan’s defence agency, Fukushima Nukaga, declared that Japan should consider pre-emptive strikes “if an enemy country definitely has a way of attacking Japan and has its finger on the trigger.”

Japan’s bellicose response has provoked an angry reaction in South Korea, which, like China, is keen to defuse the crisis. “There is no reason to fuss over this from the break of dawn like Japan, but every reason to do the opposite,” a statement from South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun’s office declared. The South Korean government is attempting to balance—opposing tough economic and military action against North Korea, while keeping onside with Washington. Seoul has temporarily cut aid to Pyongyang.

By pushing Japan to take the leading role, the Bush administration is actively encouraging the revival of militarism in Japan and heightening pressure on China. Its rhetoric about a “diplomatic solution” is entirely cynical. Since last September, the US has deliberately tightened the noose around the stricken North Korean economy by pressuring international banks and financial institutions to end relations with North Korea. While the US campaign is nominally to end North Korea’s “illicit” activities, the objective is to economically strangle the country.

An article published on June 6 on *YaleGlobal Online* warned that the US “financial quarantine” has exacerbated North Korea’s “rogue behavior” by hurting its “legitimate economy”. Nigel Cowie, general manager of the Daedong Credit Bank, the only foreign bank in Pyongyang, said: “The result of these actions against banks doing business with DPRK [is] that criminal activities go underground and [are] harder to trace, and legitimate business either give up, or end up appearing suspicious by being forced to use clandestine methods.”

The article pointed out that the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang had been seeking to embrace global capital since 1998 and had already taken a series of pro-market measures. These included opening up rural markets, deregulating prices and wages and setting up free trade zones. North Korean officials had been sent overseas to study market economics, including at the New York Stock Exchange, and a Centre for the Study of the Capitalist System had been established in North Korea.

However, the Bush administration’s constant campaign of provoking tensions has sabotaged efforts by South Korea, China and European countries to open up the North Korean economy. Its Kaesong industrial zone, for instance, was projected to employ one million workers by 2012. Ongoing US threats have kept the zone to no more than a few thousands workers and a handful of South Korean factories. Earlier this year, Washington demanded that South Korea exclude products made in Kaesong from the terms of a free trade agreement being negotiated between the two countries.

The *YaleGlobal* article commented: “It is a remarkable irony that an administration so wedded, at least rhetorically, to market economics and globalisation has been so hostile to any steps North Korea takes in that direction. From the hardliner point of view,

though, engaging North Korea sustains the regime. Any successful economic activity, illegitimate or legitimate, further delays the regime collapse that hardliners have anticipated for nearly two decades.”

The Bush administration’s tactics are obvious—to tighten the economic screws on North Korea to precipitate a political collapse, while, at the same time, exploiting the North Korean “threat” to secure a closer military alliance with a stronger Japan, directed against China. Washington has wholeheartedly backed the Japanese resolution in the UN Security Council because it will only strengthen this strategy. US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill has been dispatched to North East Asia for discussions with Japan, South Korea and China. The US has also called for a resumption of the six-party talks, but it has ruled out any concessions to North Korea thus dooming any negotiations in advance.

At the same time, the Bush administration has not ruled out the military option. It has exploited the “missile crisis” as a pretext for placing its controversial anti-ballistic missile system into “operational mode” for the first time. Prior to the North Korean missile tests, the Pentagon also hinted that it may try to shoot down North Korea’s long-range missile, which, in the event, failed less than a minute after launch. Leading Democrats have not only backed the Bush administration, but proposed even more reckless military actions.

In a comment in the *Washington Post* on June 22, Clinton’s former defence secretary William Perry and assistant defence secretary Ashton Carter called for a “preemptive” US military strike on North Korea’s missile launch pad, even though such action carried the risk of an “all-out war” on the Korean Peninsula. Perry and Carter reiterated their position in an article in *Time* magazine on July 8.

“Critics of our article, including members of Bush administration, say that a pre-emptive strike is too risky. But if the US is ever going to defend a line in the sand with North Korea, that is the least provocative way to do it, and next time it will only be riskier,” they declared, concluding: “We don’t know whether North Korea’s ambitions can be blunted by anything short of the use of force unless and until the US takes the danger seriously and gets in the game.”

The last consideration in this tactical debate in US ruling circles is the catastrophic consequences of an “all out war” for hundreds of millions of people in North East Asia.



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