

Washington threatens North Korea over announced nuclear test

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The Bush administration eagerly seized on North Korea's announcement on Tuesday of a planned nuclear test to heighten tensions in North East Asia and menace the small, impoverished state with severe consequences.

Given its economic and technological backwardness, it is not even clear that the Pyongyang regime has an atomic bomb. No test date has been announced. Whether it is bluffing or not, however, North Korean's reckless actions have played directly into the hands of the most militarist sections of the ruling elites in Washington, Tokyo and other capitals.

Washington issued a formal threat to Pyongyang via UN channels. In a speech on Wednesday, top US negotiator on North Korea, Christopher Hill, declared: "We are not going to live with a nuclear North Korea, we are not going to accept it." He warned: "It [North Korea] can have a future or it can have these weapons. It cannot have both."

Hill's statement was an unambiguous declaration that Washington intends to use all available means, including war, to destroy the Pyongyang regime. Yesterday, White House officials softened the language, declaring the US was not threatening Pyongyang with "lethal" action. The threat nevertheless remains, as President Bush has repeatedly declared that all options, including the military one, are on the table.

The US is already engaged in provocative steps to pressure international banks to sever financial relations with the economically crippled state. Last September the US Treasury took action against the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA), eventually forcing it to freeze North Korean assets. Since then, other banks have begun to cut ties with Pyongyang. These moves have effectively scuttled ongoing six-party talks, convened by China and including the US, the two Koreas, Japan and Russia, to resolve the protracted standoff over North Korea's nuclear programs.

North Korea has refused to return to the six-party negotiations until its funds are released and the US ends further efforts to enforce a total financial blockade. The announced nuclear test is just the latest in a series of rather desperate attempts by Pyongyang to pressure the US to be more accommodating. In July, North Korea ignored international warnings and test-fired seven missiles—a move that only allowed the US and Japan to further isolate the regime by pushing through a UN Security Council resolution condemning its actions.

Washington's relentless campaign is not in response to any real military threat from Pyongyang, nor is it primarily directed against North Korea. For more than a decade, the US has exploited the North Korean "menace" as a means for justifying its continued military presence in North East Asia, asserting its strategic dominance over the region and pressuring its rivals, particularly Beijing, which has a formal alliance with Pyongyang. In 2001, the Bush administration quickly sank plans to establish North Korea as a new cheap labour platform, reunify the two Koreas and transform the Korean peninsula into a key regional transport corridor.

A North Korean nuclear test threatens to trigger a nuclear arms race in North East Asia and beyond. Japan's new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is well known for his militarist views. During the so-called missile crisis in July, Abe enunciated his own version of the Bush administration's doctrine of "preventative war," declaring that Japan had to have the military capacity for 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, "there is an argument that attacking the missile bases would be within the legal right to self-defence."

Following this week's North Korean announcement, Abe declared that Japan would not tolerate a nuclear test. "If the test is carried out, I believe the international

community would respond harshly,” he said. Tokyo’s UN ambassador Kenzo Oshima said a nuclear test “would constitute a grave threat to nonproliferation,” obliquely hinting that Japan would be compelled to develop its own nuclear arsenal. Abe is connected to the most right-wing factions of the political establishment that advocate Japan becoming “a normal nation,” that is, able to wield the full range of military power, including nuclear weapons, unfettered by the constraints of the country’s post-war “pacifist” constitution.

The Australian government—the Bush administration’s other close ally in the region—also leapt on Pyongyang’s statement. Echoing Washington, Prime Minister John Howard immediately branded North Korea “an international outlaw” and called for a maximum diplomatic response. His government’s own militarist actions have played no small part in ramping up tensions within the region. Howard recently announced a major expansion of the Australian military, reiterated his commitment to US wars of aggression and outlined plans for further neo-colonial interventions in the Asia-Pacific region beyond the Solomons and East Timor.

The American denunciations of North Korea reek of hypocrisy. The US not only has the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, capable of obliterating North Korea many times over, but tacitly permits Israel, Pakistan and India to maintain nuclear weapons. Washington has ditched the limited sanctions placed on New Delhi and Islamabad following their nuclear tests in 1998. In the case of India, the Bush administration has agreed to a nuclear deal allowing it to retain its nuclear military programs, while obtaining access to the latest US civilian nuclear technology—a move that undermines the entire Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The greatest threat to peace is not North Korea, with its very limited economic and military capacity, but the United States. Under the guise of its bogus “war on terror”, the Bush administration has waged wars of aggression to subjugate Afghanistan and Iraq as part of broader US ambitions to dominate the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. In 2002, Bush denounced North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, as part of an “axis of evil,” making Pyongyang another US target for “regime change”. In the same year, portions of the Pentagon’s “Nuclear Posture Review” were leaked to the press, revealing that the US was prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea.

Announcing this week’s decision, a foreign ministry spokesman in Pyongyang said: “The US extreme threat of

a nuclear war and sanctions and pressure compel the DPRK [Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea] to conduct a nuclear test, an essential process for bolstering [our] nuclear deterrent, as a corresponding measure for defence.”

While it has ample reason to fear US aggression, North Korea’s decision to test a nuclear device will in no way contribute to stopping such an attack. To imagine that a few crude nuclear bombs could enhance North Korea’s military capacity against the Pentagon’s vast array of sophisticated weapons is nothing but absurd and politically reckless posturing. Far from acting as a deterrent, the existence of North Korean nuclear weaponry would provide a convenient pretext for an American assault and make it far more likely.

Knowing full well that his military has no capacity to directly threaten the US, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has previously resorted to gruesome declarations against South Korea and Japan. Official press releases from Pyongyang have variously warned that Japan or South Korea would become “a sea of fire” if North Korea were threatened, blockaded or attacked. Bloodcurdling threats to incinerate millions of innocent working people only strengthen the hand of the most right-wing elements in Japan and South Korea.

While the US and international press routinely describe it as “communist,” the North Korean regime has nothing to do with genuine socialism, which is based on unifying, not dividing, workers internationally. Pyongyang’s deeply ingrained nationalism is a variant of Stalinism, which is based on the reactionary utopian perspective of “socialism in one country”. Far from carrying out any struggle against imperialist aggression, its empty posturing is aimed at securing a more advantageous relationship with the major powers.

North Korea’s announced nuclear test is a graphic demonstration of the regime’s political bankruptcy. As well as providing grist for the mill of the Bush administration, the threat heightens fears in Japan, South Korea and the broader region and drives a political wedge into the international working class—the only social force capable of mounting a struggle against war and the capitalist order that gives rise to it.



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