

Behind the UN debate on North Korea: growing Great Power rivalry

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Despite intense pressure from the Bush administration for tough sanctions against North Korea over Monday's nuclear test, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have not yet reached any agreement.

The US, backed by Britain and France, is pushing for a resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, making any action binding on all UN member states. China and Russia have supported "punitive" measures against Pyongyang, but opposed a Chapter 7 resolution, concerned that it would be used as the pretext for military aggression as was the case in the US-led invasion of Iraq.

China's UN ambassador Wang Guangya has called for "a firm, constructive, appropriate but prudent response". Beijing has opposed a provocative American proposal to allow the interception and searching of all North Korean vessels on the high seas. The US has been pressing for such actions, which are in breach of international law, since 2003 as part of its Proliferation Security Initiative with allies such as Japan and Australia.

China is deeply concerned that North Korea's nuclear test will trigger an arms race in North East Asia. Japan's newly installed Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday formally restated the country's longstanding policy that acquiring nuclear arms was "not an option at all". However, as Beijing is well aware, Abe backed the aggressive stance in the region adopted by his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi, with the support of the Bush administration. In 2002, he cautiously suggested it was "not necessarily unconstitutional" for Japan to use small, tactical nuclear weapons.

Japan has supported a tough UN resolution against North Korea. Without even waiting for a decision in the Security Council, Tokyo announced a new battery of sanctions against Pyongyang, including barring all North Korean ships from Japanese ports and a ban on all North Korean imports. The latest measures come on top of Japanese bans imposed following North Korea's missile tests in July.

The US and Japan are pushing both China and South Korea—North Korea's two largest trading partners—to restrict their economic relations with Pyongyang. Such demands cut directly across South Korean and Chinese efforts to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula, by opening up North Korea as a cheap labour platform and regional transit route. China and South Korea fear that crippling sanctions will trigger an economic and political crisis in North Korea that will have immediate ramifications for

bordering countries.

The fault lines in the UN are another sign of sharpening Great Power rivalry. The Bush administration's belligerent stance is not about North Korea's tiny nuclear armoury, which poses no significant military threat to the US now or in the near future. If the White House were seriously concerned about ending North Korea's nuclear arms, an obvious solution is available—a deal with Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear facilities and weapons in return for economic assistance and the normalisation of relations with the US.

North Korea's reckless "anti-imperialist" grandstanding has nothing to do with a genuine struggle against imperialism and only plays into the hands of the most right-wing, militarist layers of the ruling elite in Washington. Pyongyang is seeking to use its nuclear test to pressure the US for better relations, including a formal end to the 1950-53 Korean War, diplomatic recognition and an end to the decades-long US economic blockade of the country. Over the past two days, North Korean officials have reiterated their willingness to discuss a deal over de-nuclearisation in bilateral talks with the US—something that the Bush administration has repeatedly ruled out. At the same time, Pyongyang has warned it will respond to threats, stating that sanctions would amount to a declaration of war.

President Bush told a news conference yesterday the US had no plans to invade or attack North Korea, but he has repeatedly declared that all options are on the table. Moreover, by branding North Korea in 2002 as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran, he made plain that the US objective was "regime change" in Pyongyang, as in Baghdad and Tehran.

In his comments yesterday, Bush hypocritically declared that a broad framework for resolving nuclear standoff had been reached in September last year at the last round of six-party talks—involving the US, the two Koreas, China, Japan and Russia. The US only agreed reluctantly to the joint statement setting out in general terms an offer of normalised relations and economic cooperation in return for North Korea's abandonment of all nuclear weapons programs. The US Treasury began immediately pressuring the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA) to freeze North Korean assets. Not surprisingly, North Korea denounced the step as a sign of bad faith and refused to return to six-party talks without its reversal.

In a scathing criticism of Bush's policy, US commentator Joseph Cirincione from the Center for American Progress pointed to the

sharp divisions in the White House over North Korea. From the outset, Vice President Richard Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have been deeply hostile to any negotiations with North Korea. In response to the joint agreement at the six party talks, Cirincione explained: “[T]he neoconservatives struck back. The deal was undercut in the same month by the offices of the vice-president and secretary of defence, which together orchestrated financial restrictions that angered the North Koreans enough to kill the deal but not kill the [nuclear] program.”

Cirincione is one of a growing number of commentators and political figures inside and outside the US calling on the Bush administration to agree to direct talks with North Korea. “The US should tell North Korea that we will give them the deal we gave Libya: complete dismantlement of the nuclear program in exchange for diplomatic recognition, security assurances, and economic incentives. The Libyan model is far superior to the Iraqi one: its costs were minimal, no one died, and it was one hundred percent effective,” Cirincione wrote.

Yet the Bush administration has consistently ruled out such an approach. The obvious question is: why? The answer lies in the deepening struggle among the major powers for domination in a key strategic region that is responsible for a large portion of the world’s industrial output. As in the Middle East and Central Asia, the Bush administration is seeking to use American military might as a lever to maintain US economic and strategic hegemony in North East Asia.

The situation today is in marked contrast to 2000. The Clinton administration backed the Sunshine Policy of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who laid out a broad long term plan for economic cooperation between the two Koreas, leading to a reduction of tensions on the peninsula and its eventual political reunification. For the first time, the top leaders of North and South Korea met in June 2000, setting off euphoria in official circles and the media about peace in North East Asia.

Kim Dae-jung had the support of powerful sections of South Korean business, which saw the opportunity for shifting manufacturing operations to North Korea to take advantage of cheap labour, disciplined by a police state and at a fraction of the cost at home. Plans were made for re-opening rail and road lines blocked since the Korean War, establishing a special economic zone at Kaesong just over the border and expanding a tourist complex at Mount Kumgang. The reunion of families divided for decades and the joint entry of the Korean teams at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 were presented as signs of a general rapprochement.

Kim Dae-jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for his efforts: a sure sign that bigger interests were at stake than just those of North and South Korea. European corporations saw the opportunity for a far closer integration with the dynamic economic countries of North East Asia—China, South Korea and Japan. The opening up of the Korean peninsula provided a key link in grand plans for land routes stretching from Europe to Russia and Central Asia through to China, South Korea, and across the narrow strait to Japan.

Kim Dae-jung referred to the vision, describing the accord with the North as positioning Korea at the centre of a new “Silk Road”

between Europe and Asia. The plan also offered South Korea and Japan the prospect of access to Central Asia and Russia oil and gas along pipelines through North Asia. European companies visited North Korea to discuss the business prospects that were opening up. In December 2000, US secretary of state Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang and met North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, as a step toward the full normalisation of relations with the US.

All of these prospects collapsed virtually overnight when President Bush took office in early 2001. The right-wing ideologues, who had repeatedly denounced Clinton’s policy on North Korea as “appeasement” and condemned Albright’s trip as tantamount to treachery, filled many of the top posts. Secretary of state Colin Powell announced in March 2001 that the new administration intended to “pick up where President Clinton left off”, but he was quickly countermanded. Washington froze all contacts with North Korea and, after a lengthy “policy view”, announced a new set of ultimatums that effectively ended any meaningful negotiations.

At the same time, Kim Jong-il was increasingly vilified as an erratic, evil dictator who “starved his own people” and threatened the world. Behind this ideological barrage and the conscious sabotage of the Sunshine Policy was a definite political logic. The broad plan for reduced tensions on the Korean peninsula and the economic integration of the Eurasian landmass left the US on the sidelines, undermined the rationale for existing American military bases in South Korea and Japan and cut across US strategies to intervene in Central Asia. By menacing North Korea and raising tensions throughout the region, Washington retained the whip hand in dictating terms to its rivals for influence in North East Asia.

The same basic pattern has marked the past four years. In agreeing to six-party talks sponsored by China in 2003, the Bush administration had no intention of seriously negotiating with North Korea. Rather the talks provided a convenient forum to pressure the other four parties to take tougher action against North Korea. South Korea and China, in the face of fierce US opposition, attempted to continue their policy of economic cooperation with North Korea. Hostile to the Sunshine Policy, the Bush administration has never elaborated a positive alternative, even from its own standpoint. The aim of its constant provocations and threats against North Korea has been purely negative—designed to maintain US dominance in the region at the expense of its rivals.

The result of the Bush administration’s reckless policies is now evident: by provoking North Korea to carry out a nuclear test, the US is encouraging a regional arms race that threatens to take the intensifying rivalry in North East Asia to a new and more dangerous level.



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