

Bush administration leads chorus of denunciations against North Korea's nuclear test

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The Bush administration has responded to North Korea's announcement yesterday that it had tested a nuclear device with denunciations and threats of tough new sanctions. While Pyongyang's actions are certainly reckless and threaten to trigger a dangerous nuclear arms race in North East Asia, the chief responsibility for the current situation rests squarely with the White House, which has deliberately and provocatively heightened tensions in the region over the past five years.

The North Korean regime, which announced the test last week, reportedly informed its ally China about 20 minutes prior to detonating the bomb. While the nuclear explosion has not been formally confirmed outside North Korea, seismic stations in the US, South Korea and Russia registered activity at the time and place described in the announcement. Several US officials suggested that the blast may have been small, perhaps indicating a failed test, but Russian estimates put the strength at 5 to 15 kilotons—roughly equivalent to the American bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

US President George Bush condemned the test as “a provocative act” and announced moves for an immediate UN response. Australian Prime Minister John Howard, one of the first in the chorus of condemnation, demanded tough measures under Chapter 7 of the UN charter, which provides for military action and compulsory sanctions. China, which urged North Korea not to conduct the test, angrily condemned Pyongyang's “brazen” action. Beijing fears in particular that Japan could exploit a nuclear-armed North Korea as the pretext for developing its own atomic weapons.

Washington is pressing for the UN Security Council to rapidly impose Chapter 7 economic and political sanctions on North Korea, including an arms embargo, the freezing of its financial assets and a trade ban on luxury items. The US is also proposing that the UN authorise the interception and inspection of all cargo to and from North Korea on the pretext of halting “proliferation”. Under the Proliferation Security Initiative established in May 2003, the US and its allies, including Japan and Australia, have been training to intercept shipments from North Korea, Iran and other countries. The proposed UN measure stops short of a full naval blockade, which constitutes an act of war.

The wave of condemnation stinks of cant and hypocrisy. The overriding concern of the Bush administration has never been about North Korea's nuclear programs. As soon as he took office in 2001, President Bush overturned previous policies aimed at normalising relations on the basis of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. Instead the White House rapidly escalated tensions with North Korea as a means

of securing “regime change” in Pyongyang and asserting US domination in the region, directed in particular against China, which Bush had branded as a strategic competitor.

While the US denounces and threatens North Korea and Iran over their nuclear programs, it tacitly allows allies, including India, Pakistan and Israel, to build atomic weapons and develop missiles capable of delivering them. Pakistan and India, which carried out their own nuclear tests in 1998 and ignored subsequent international protests, both issued statements criticising North Korea and raising concerns about regional instability. The Bush administration is currently developing a new generation of nuclear weapons and has refused to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

At most, Pyongyang has a handful of crude atomic bombs, whereas the US maintains a huge nuclear arsenal, a portion of which has been targeted against North Korea for decades. While it is doubtful that North Korea has any delivery system for its atomic bombs, the US has many: from submarine-launched cruise missiles and ICBMs to tactical nuclear weapons, which were, until the end of the 1980s, stationed in South Korea as part of the Pentagon's battle plan on the peninsula.

In his statement, Bush declared that Pyongyang's nuclear test constituted “a threat to international peace and security”. In fact, the greatest threat to international peace and stability is not the small, impoverished state of North Korea, but the US. For the past decade and a half, the US has aggressively exploited its residual military superiority to carry out a succession of wars and military actions to advance American economic and strategic interests against its European and Asian rivals.

Under the banner of its fraudulent “war on terror,” the US administration has subjugated Afghanistan and illegally invaded Iraq. Moreover, Bush has enunciated a strategic doctrine of “preventative war” against any country deemed a potential threat. The waging of such wars of aggression was the main crime for which the Nazi leaders were prosecuted at Nuremberg after World War II. In 2002, Bush effectively made Pyongyang a prime target for “regime change” when he included it as part of an “axis of evil” along with Iraq and Iran.

In the climate of profound international tension created by US militarism, it is hardly unexpected that North Korea has decided to test a nuclear device. A comment in today's *Financial Times* pointedly cited former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who told the newspaper earlier this year: “The message out of Iraq is that if you don't have nuclear weapons you get invaded, if you do have nuclear

weapons, you don't get invaded." While a few rudimentary nuclear weapons would provide no defence against a concerted US attack, the invasion of Iraq no doubt encouraged North Korea to embark on its present risky course of action.

The international media contains of a deluge of coverage painting North Korea as an erratic and unstable rogue state and its leader Kim Jong Il as a crazed, irrational madman, who is threatening the world with nuclear weapons. The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang nor supports its attempts to accumulate a nuclear arsenal, but there is a definite logic to North Korea's actions. For all its empty bluster about opposing US imperialism, the latest test is a desperate attempt to force Washington to end its menacing threats of "regime change" and to normalise relations between the two countries.

The devastating impact of the Korean War is etched deeply into the memories of North Korean leaders. Amid rising tensions and repeated provocations from the US-backed police state in South Korea, Pyongyang unleashed its military across the border in 1950. Washington responded immediately. Under the banner of the UN, the US propped up its puppet in the south, then launched a full-scale invasion of North Korea. The US military literally levelled North Korean cities, towns and villages with bombs and hundreds of thousands of gallons of napalm. An estimated three million North Koreans were killed along with a million South Koreans, nearly a million Chinese soldiers and more than 50,000 US troops. US commander General Douglas MacArthur called for the use of 30 to 50 nuclear weapons to create a "belt of radioactive cobalt" along the border with China, but was blocked by the Truman administration, which feared that the Soviet Union would react.

For more than half a century, North Korea has faced a constant American military threat, which was heightened after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Washington has never formally ended the war with Pyongyang and has maintained its economic blockade of the country. In 1994, the Clinton administration was poised on the brink of attacking North Korea over its nuclear programs, before finally pulling back and signing a deal known as the Agreed Framework. Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear facilities in return for the normalisation of relations with the US and assistance in building civilian power reactors.

In 2000, the first steps toward easing tensions led to an unprecedented meeting between Kim Jong Il and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, whose so-called Sunshine Policy envisaged the opening up of North Korea as a cheap labour platform and regional transport route. In the dying days of the Clinton administration, US Secretary of State Albright made an official trip to Pyongyang, met with Kim Jong Il and held out the prospects of establishing full relations between the two countries.

On assuming office in 2001, the Bush administration immediately broke off all talks with North Korea pending a protracted policy review. Right-wing Republicans had repeatedly denounced the Agreed Framework and the Clinton administration for being too soft on North Korea. From the outset, however, the White House made plain that its strategy was to tighten the noose around the "rogue state" with the aim of precipitating the collapse of the regime. At the conclusion of its review, in July 2001, the US placed a series of onerous new demands on North Korea as the price for any talks.

These actions undermined South Korea's Sunshine Policy and effectively scuttled the Agreed Framework. Not only was Pyongyang included in the US "axis of evil," but portions of the Pentagon's

"Nuclear Posture Review", leaked to the media in March 2002, revealed that the US was prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea. Tensions rapidly escalated in the lead up to the US-led invasion of Iraq. Confronted by US allegations in October 2002 of a secret uranium enrichment program, North Korea formally abrogated the Agreed Framework, withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled international nuclear inspectors and restarted its atomic facilities.

The Pyongyang regime has repeatedly made clear it was willing to compromise in return for direct negotiations with Washington. Since the early 1990s, its chief objective has been a formal US security guarantee and normalised relations, including the lifting of the blockade that has crippled North Korean economic development and played no small part in the country's devastating food shortages. The Bush administration has adamantly refused to speak directly to Pyongyang, declaring that the US would not be "blackmailed" into "rewarding bad behaviour" and repeatedly stated that "all options are on the table"—that is, including military ones.

As the confrontation continued, the US agreed to a Chinese initiative in 2003 for six-party talks, which included the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia. Washington's aim, however, has not been to negotiate a deal with North Korea, but rather to pressure the other four countries to adopt a more aggressive stance against Pyongyang. As a result, the last three years have been punctuated by a series of US provocations. At the last round of talks in September last year, US negotiators finally agreed to a broad statement of principles to provide the framework for ending the standoff. At the same time, 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 been pressured to follow suit, prompting Pyongyang to refuse to attend six-party talks.

There are no signs that the Bush administration is about to change its aggressive stance toward North Korea. In his statement yesterday, Bush said the US "remains committed to diplomacy". At the same time, he declared that Pyongyang remained "one of the world's leading proliferators of missile technology," including Iran and Syria, and warned that any transfer of nuclear weapons or material would be considered "a grave threat to the United States". Washington's immediate course of action is to pursue punitive sanctions in the UN Security Council. But nothing can be ruled out as the Bush administration exploits the crisis for domestic political purposes prior to November's congressional poll.



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