

# North Korea threatens new nuclear tests

**John Chan**  
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Tensions in North East Asia rose again last week after North Korea warned of further nuclear weapon and ballistic missile tests unless the UN Security Council apologised for its recent statement criticising Pyongyang's April 5 missile launch. A foreign ministry spokesman told the state-run media that North Korea's "additional self-defensive measures" could also include a uranium enrichment program to enhance its nuclear capabilities.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton immediately declared that the US would not be "blackmailed" and would "tighten the band around North Korea". While making threats, the US is attempting to restart the six-party talks hosted by China, involving US, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, over North Korea's nuclear programs. The Obama administration's new envoy on North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, is heading to China, Russia, South Korea and Japan this week to try to revive the stalled negotiations.

Having focussed on the US wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, the Obama administration is not in a position, for now, to initiate a major confrontation with North Korea. Like the previous Bush administration, however, the Obama White House is using Pyongyang's nuclear programs to manipulate the geopolitics in North East Asia, playing up tensions when necessary, in order to justify the US military presence in South Korea and Japan, and its planned regional missile shield.

Obama has supported the 2007 agreement in which the Bush administration agreed to an "action-for-action" dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs. But like Bush, his administration has also dragged out US steps toward the normalisation of relations and a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War. Among the new administration's first actions was to impose sanctions on three North Korean companies allegedly involved in developing missile and nuclear programs.

After North Korea's missile test last month, the US and Japan pressured for a new UN resolution to impose sanctions on Pyongyang for allegedly breaching a ban on ballistic missile testing. China and Russia refused to support the resolution, instead backing North Korea's claim that it had been launching a satellite, not conducting a missile test. The standoff only ended after Washington accepted a proposal by Beijing for a non-binding presidential statement condemning North Korea.

Pyongyang responded by declaring that it regarded the 2007

agreement as void and would never return to six-party talks. Subsequently, it expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors from its Yongbyon nuclear reactor and said it would restart processing spent reactor fuel rods to extract plutonium, which can be used to make nuclear bombs.

The international media has once again painted Pyongyang as the villain disrupting efforts to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully. But the real responsibility for the continuing tensions on the Korean peninsula rests with successive US administrations, which have dragged out and stalled on the implementation of agreements.

The Clinton administration signed an Agreed Framework with Pyongyang in 1994, aimed at closing North Korea's existing nuclear facilities in return for fuel oil, two light water power reactors and the normalisation of relations. By the time that Clinton left office, the foundations of the power reactors had yet to be laid and diplomatic relations were barely beginning to thaw.

The Republican hardliners that staffed the Bush administration had always been highly critical of the Agreed Framework and immediately worked to undermine it. In 2002, Bush provocatively branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil," along with Iraq and Iran. Later that year, the US, using purported evidence of a secret North Korean uranium enrichment program, ended the supply of fuel oil, effectively scrapping the Agreed Framework.

In response, Pyongyang expelled the IAEA inspectors, pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and resumed its plutonium reprocessing. Washington only agreed to China's proposed six-party talks in 2003 as a means of easing tensions in North East Asia after widespread resistance emerged to its occupation of Iraq.

North Korea eventually accepted an agreement in 2005 to dismantle its nuclear facilities in exchange for aid and the normalisation of relations with the US. However, opponents of the deal in the Bush administration effectively sabotaged the process by freezing North Korean assets in the Macau-based bank Banco Delta Asia. Pyongyang walked out of the talks, test-fired a Taepodong-2 missile in July 2006, and then carried out its first nuclear test in October 2006.

An agreement was finally reached in February 2007 as a means of shutting down North Korea's nuclear facilities and preventing the further manufacture of weapons. Pyongyang carried out its side

of the bargain, if sometimes belatedly—shutting down its facilities, allowing IAEA inspectors back into the country and beginning the dismantling of its reactor and reprocessing plant.

The Bush administration's stalling tactics nearly brought the agreement to the point of collapse last August when the US demanded additional verification processes before removing North Korea from its list of terrorism-sponsoring states. Pyongyang insisted that the demand was not part of the agreement. The crisis was only defused when Washington took North Korea off the list in October, but the verification issue brought the talks to a standstill once again in December. After North Korea refused to agree to its demands, Washington cut off supplies of much-needed fuel oil.

Obama has not altered the US position since taking office, only heightening concerns and frustration in Pyongyang. The North Korean leadership is well aware that a definite perspective lies behind the US tactic of dragging out the implementation of the rather unequal agreements. By maintaining North Korea's isolation and crippling its economy, Washington has maintained intense pressure on Pyongyang and hoped to precipitate a political crisis that would work to the US's advantage.

The North Korean Stalinists have responded with overblown and reckless posturing over the building of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Pyongyang's bloodcurdling and largely empty threats are aimed at pressuring the major powers to reach a new accommodation with the regime that would integrate it into the processes of global capitalism—like its neighbour and ally, China. In the process, North Korea threatens to trigger an arms race in North East Asia that would rapidly dwarf any nuclear arsenal it could hope to construct.

The Murdoch press is pressing the Obama administration to adopt a far more aggressive approach to North Korea. In an alarmist tone, the *Times* of London wrote on April 24 that North Korea was a "fully fledged nuclear power with capacity to wipe out entire cities in Japan and South Korea". The article claimed, on the basis of unnamed intelligence sources, that North Korea had successfully miniaturised nuclear warheads to be placed atop missiles. The *Australian* wrote on April 27 that even if North Korean had not done so, "it could sail one [a nuclear bomb] to Japan or drive one to the border with South Korea, detonate it there and kill hundreds of thousands".

Right-wing politicians in Japan are exploiting the North Korean "threat" to stampede Japanese people into dropping their entrenched opposition to developing nuclear weapons and other offensive military capabilities. Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso, who visited China last week, called on the international community "not to overreact" to North Korea's threat of new nuclear tests.

In fact, Japan was put on a virtual war footing in the lead up to last month's missile test, with the Japanese military ordered to

shoot it down if it appeared to threaten the country. In China, Aso paid lip service to the need to restart the six-party talks, but the Japanese government has been critical even of the limited US steps to implement the 2007 agreement, insisting that Pyongyang provide the full information about Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s.

The "threat" posed by North Korea is grossly exaggerated. Its first Taepodong-2 missile test in July 2006 failed 40 seconds after the launch. The second missile last month flew further, but its final stage failed to separate from the second. North Korea's first underground nuclear test in October 2006 was viewed by most analysts as only partially successful and certainly did not involve a sophisticated, miniaturised device. North Korea's rudimentary nuclear and missile capabilities offer no credible deterrent to the US or even the Japanese and South Korean militaries that are backed by far greater industrial and technological capacities.

North Korea's posturing is also alienating China, which regards North Korea as a useful buffer but does not want Japan to have a pretext for developing nuclear weapons. Shen Dingli, a leading Chinese analyst, commented in the *Asia Times* on April 27 that Beijing's priority was to maintain a peaceful periphery to enable economic development. North Korea's desire of "seeking security through owning nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles does not agree with Beijing's". He warned that North Korea "could become the victim of its own self-isolation" as its strategic importance to China decreased.

In the final analysis, North Korea is a pawn being exploited by all sides. The rising tensions in North East Asia, which on the surface are a product of North Korea's nuclear programs, reflect far broader rivalries between the major powers in the region—the US, Japan and China—as each manoeuvres to advance its own economic and strategic ambitions.



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