

US issues threat to North Korea

Peter Symonds
2 June 2009

In what can only be interpreted as a direct threat, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates told a regional security conference in Singapore on Saturday that the US would not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. “We will not stand idly by as North Korea builds its capability to wreak destruction on any target in Asia—or on us,” he warned.

The remarks followed North Korea’s second nuclear test on May 25 and its test firing of several short-range missiles. While the Obama administration is pressing for tough sanctions on Pyongyang by the UN Security Council, Gates used the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore for discussions with the Japanese and South Korean defence ministers for further measures against North Korea.

Gates played down any US military build up, saying Washington had no plans to reinforce some 28,000 American troops based in South Korea. However, according to a senior US defence official cited by the *Wall Street Journal*, Gates told his Japanese and South Korean counterparts that “we have to start planning and taking some actions on our own and with our allies to look at defences” if broader international efforts to pressure North Korea failed.

A second unnamed US defence official told the newspaper that contingency planning could include stepped-up missile defence cooperation or allied troop movements. Gates’s comments coincided with the arrival of the first of 12 hi-tech US F-22 fighter jets at the American air force base on the Japanese island of Okinawa. While the four-month deployment has received little media coverage, the transfer of the advanced jets underscored Gates’s menacing remarks.

Although the US threat is directed at North Korea, it is also aimed at pressuring China to take tougher action against Pyongyang. Beijing has been reluctant to tighten sanctions against a country that is still a formal ally, fearing that it may precipitate a political crisis that the US and its allies could exploit. At the same time, China condemned North Korea’s nuclear test, concerned that it could provide the pretext for Japan and South Korea to strengthen their militaries and in the longer term acquire their own nuclear weapons.

As discussions continue in the UN Security Council about a resolution on North Korea, a top-level US delegation led by US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg is holding detailed talks this week in Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing about a coordinated response to the nuclear test. The presence of Stuart Levey, the Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, in the delegation indicates that the US is pushing for punitive measures aimed at blocking North Korean access to the international banking system.

In 2005, the US Treasury accused Banco Delta Asia in Macao of being involved in money laundering, prompting authorities to freeze North Korean funds. The move effectively derailed efforts to secure an agreement via six-party talks—involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas—to end the standoff over North Korea’s nuclear programs. North Korea’s first nuclear test in October 2006 followed months of wrangling over freeing up its frozen funds in Macao.

In Singapore, Gates met with Lieutenant General Ma Ziaotian, the Chinese army’s deputy chief of general staff, who declared that Beijing was opposed to nuclear proliferation, but called on all parties to remain “cool-headed”. There are some signs of growing Chinese frustration with North Korea’s actions. Zhang Liangui, from the high-level Party School for Chinese Communist Party officials, told the *Wall Street Journal*: “I’m less interested in stability [in North Korea] than in having a denuclearised Korean peninsula. It is not in China’s interest to have our neighbour exploding nuclear devices.”

China has the means to bring enormous pressure to bear on North Korea. According to South Korean statistics, China accounted for 73 percent of North Korea’s trade last year up from less than one third in 2003. Pyongyang relies on China for 90 percent of its oil, 80 percent of its consumer goods and 45 percent of its food.

Beijing has previously used the threat of economic restrictions in a limited way to pressure North Korea to take part in negotiations. However, in his comments in Singapore, Gates declared that it would be “hard to point to them [the six-party talks] at this point as an example of success.” He ruled

out any American offer to encourage North Korea to recommence negotiations, complaining that the US has previously had to “pay a price” for a return to the status quo. “As the expression goes in the United States,” Gates said, “I’m tired of buying the same horse twice.”

In reality, the present tensions are primarily the outcome of the failure of successive US administrations to live up to their side of deals struck with North Korea. Following the 2006 nuclear test, an agreement was finally reached at six-party talks in February 2007 whereby Pyongyang shut down and eventually dismantled its nuclear facilities in return for economic aid and the establishment of normal diplomatic and economic relations, particularly with the US.

While North Korea carried out its side of the deal, the Bush administration baulked at taking the first step toward normal relations by removing Pyongyang from the US State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism. The US eventually took that step but the process broke down in December 2008 when North Korea refused to accept new American verification demands. When the newly installed Obama administration failed to take any steps to ease tensions, Pyongyang restarted its nuclear programs and declared it would never return to the six-party talks.

Having sponsored the negotiations, the effective collapse of the six-party talks places China in a bind. If it does not join US efforts to tighten the screws on North Korea, Gates’s comments hint at a US-led military build up in North East Asia. If Beijing does take part, the result may well be a further escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula. The Chinese regime is well aware that the US is exploiting the North Korean issue as a means of justifying and enhancing its own already extensive military presence in the region.

North Korea’s actions stem from the Stalinist regime’s deep-going crisis, which has been greatly exacerbated by the US economic blockade of the country since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Pyongyang’s acquisition of a handful of nuclear weapons, far from enhancing the country’s security, has played into the hands of the most militaristic sections in ruling circles in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. Moreover, its objective is not to “oppose imperialism” but to seek a new accommodation with the US and other major powers.

In the wake of the nuclear test, the South Korean administration declared that it would join the US-sponsored Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) established during the Bush administration, purportedly to stop the spread of so-called weapons of mass destruction. The PSI mooted the boarding and searching of vessels on the high seas in breach of international law. Previously, Seoul refused to join the PSI so as not to

alienate Pyongyang. However, President Lee Myung-bak, from the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP), seized on the nuclear test to announce South Korea’s involvement.

North Korea responded by declaring that the 1953 Armistice ending the Korean War was null and void and threatened military reprisals if any attempt was made to board one of its vessels. Further raising tensions, American defence officials told the media last Friday that US satellite imagery suggested that North Korea was preparing to test another long-range ballistic missile. In South Korea, US and South Korean troops have been placed on the second highest level of surveillance alert.

While the Obama administration remains relatively tight-lipped about its strategy, former US Defence Secretary William Perry pointed to the underlying logic in comments last week to the US Council on Foreign Relations. “We could have stopped this last nuclear test if we had chosen to do so. We could have stopped the first one had we chosen to do so,” he said. “That requires a military action, and I’m not recommending military action. But somewhere along in this series of coercive actions, one can imagine an escalation, and if the ones that are less do not succeed, we have to be willing to consider the other ones.”

The obvious danger in this game of brinkmanship is that a miscalculation could trigger a far broader conflict. As defence secretary under Democrat President Clinton, Perry is aware of the high stakes involved. In 1994, the Clinton administration only pulled back from launching an attack on North Korea’s nuclear facilities when it became clear that it could provoke a devastating full-scale war on the Korean peninsula.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact