North Korean nuclear crisis enters a new stage

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A UN Security Council resolution last Friday imposing harsher sanctions on North Korea over its May 25 nuclear test and the subsequent threats by Pyongyang to step up its nuclear weapon program with enriched uranium, indicate the prolonged crisis on the Korean Peninsula has entered a new and more dangerous phase.

UN Resolution 1874, which was drafted by the US, and with strong backing from Japan, bans trade in weapons with North Korea, except small arms. China insisted on the exception and joined Russia in demanding the draft be modified on the inspection of North Korean ships in international waters. Both powers fear that the US and its allies could exploit such inspections to create a provocation that would spark a military conflict.

The US agreed to charge the wording from the UN Security Council "authorises" to "calls upon" all UN nations to inspect ships bound to and from North Korea believed to contain nuclear-related materials. Flag states that refuse to allow their ships to be boarded must direct the vessel to "an appropriate and convenient port" for inspection.

China's UN envoy Zhang Yesui told the media: "We believe sanctions such as cargo inspections are very complicated and sensitive and countries involved must act prudently and with sufficient grounds." Nevertheless, China agreed to the measure, which it had been resisting since 2006 following North Korea's first nuclear test.

Beijing also agreed to sanctions on all financial transactions "that could contribute to North Korea's development of WMD and missile programs" and bans on all aid to North Korea, except humanitarian aid and assistance in ending its nuclear programs.

China is fearful that Pyongyang's rather reckless actions could provide the pretext for Japan and South Korea to boost their militaries, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons, which would threaten not only Pyongyang, but also Beijing. At the same time, the Chinese government does not want a political collapse in North Korea that could be exploited by the US and its allies.

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang called on all parties to "remain calm and exercise restraint, solve relevant issues through dialogue and consultations and refrain from taking any actions that could aggravate the situation". Beijing has been pushing for a return to six-party talks involving China, the US, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas to resolve the protracted standoff over North Korea's nuclear programs.

Pyongyang, however, has declared that it will not return to six-party talks. It has expelled international nuclear inspectors and restarted its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. After the UN resolution was passed, North Korea acknowledged for the first time that it had a uranium enrichment program, which would be used to provide fuel for its power reactors. It also said it would convert the remainder of its plutonium into weapons and warned that any attempt to board its ships would be regarded as an act of war. US and South Korean officials claim that North Korea is also preparing for another long-range ballistic missile test.

Such posturing by the crisis-ridden Stalinist regime has nothing to do with any genuine struggle against imperialism nor will it enhance the defences of the small beleaguered nation. It is aimed at shoring up cracks within the ruling elite at home as well as exerting pressure on the US and its allies for some form of accommodation.

According to a US National Intelligence statement on June 15, North Korea's second nuclear test was "approximately a few kilotonnes." Its first test in 2006 was estimated at just one kilotonne. The small yields, even compared to the American atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, probably

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indicate that North Korea's weapons are primitive and the tests only partially successful.

The Obama administration has seized on North Korea's statements to adopt a more confrontational stance. The message from this week's summit between President Obama and visiting South Korean President Lee Myung-bak is that six-party talks and the agreement reached in 2007 are all but finished.

Obama declared on Tuesday: "There's been a pattern in the past where North Korea behaves in a belligerent fashion and, if it waits long enough, is then rewarded with foodstuffs and fuels and concessionary loans and whole range of benefits." He warned: "The message we're sending—and when I say 'we', not simply the United States and the Republic of Korea but, I think, the international community—is, 'we are going to break that pattern'."

A joint statement pointedly referred to the continuing commitment of the US and South Korea to "a robust defence posture ... including the US nuclear umbrella"—an obvious reference to the overwhelming superiority of the American nuclear arsenal. Lee told reporters: "North Koreans, when they look at the firm partnership and alliance that we have between our two countries, they will think twice about taking any measures that they will regret." Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* last week, Lee, who is from the right-wing Grand National Party, ruled out a return to six-party talks, saying Pyongyang had just used them to "buy time" to build nuclear weapons.

Even more revealing were comments by US vice president Joe Biden, who told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday: "We are going to enforce the UN resolution.... This is a matter of us now keeping the pressure on [North Korea], even if they say it's an act of war." In other words, Washington will press ahead with the sanctions even if it means possible military conflict with North Korea. Biden added: "This is a regime that says an awful lot of things.... It is a destabilising force in the region."

In fact, it is the US that bears the primary responsibility for the present crisis. In 2002, President Bush listed North Korea as part of an "axis of evil", along Iran and Iraq. In October that year, the Bush administration, using the pretext of an alleged North Korean uranium enrichment program, scrapped the 1994 Agreed Framework signed by the previous Clinton administration. In response, North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and restarted its small nuclear reactor and plutonium reprocessing plant.

Like Bush, Obama has declared he will not "reward" North Korea's bad behaviour. However, it is precisely the failure of successive US administration to fulfil their side of agreements signed with Pyongyang that has led to this situation. President Bill Clinton failed to begin building two light water power reactions that were part of the Agreed Framework. Bush only grudgingly took North Korea off the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, a move that the Obama administration is threatening to reverse. Washington has taken no steps towards granting what is at the top of Pyongyang's priorities—the normalisation of relations and the lifting of the US economic blockade maintained since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

The Obama administration's stance puts a great deal of pressure on China to haul its ally, North Korea, into line. Beijing is undoubtedly frustrated at the breakdown of the six-party talks in which it invested a significant amount of its prestige. China also has the means to bring the impoverished state to its knees economically as North Korea relies on China for much of its energy, food and basic consumer goods. However, by shutting off these goods, Beijing could well precipitate a political crisis in North Korea that could open the door for a pro-US state on its border and have a destabilising impact inside China itself.

What appears more likely is a sharp escalation of tensions in North East Asia, which always carries the danger of miscalculation by the major powers, leading to open conflict.

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