US warship shadows North Korean cargo vessel

John Chan
27 June 2009

The Obama administration has hailed the "unity" of the UN Security Council in imposing sanctions on North Korea following its second nuclear test on May 25. Now it is increasingly clear that the votes of China and Russia for the resolution were only aimed at warding off pressure from the US and Japan. Tensions between the US and China continue over how to implement the UN resolution, especially the interdiction of North Korean ships in international waters.

North Korea has repeatedly stated that any inspection of its ships would be regarded as an act of war. The departure of the North Korean cargo ship, the Kang Nam, for Burma last Wednesday has become a potential flashpoint. The Pentagon immediately dispatched the destroyer USS McCain to shadow the vessel, alleging that it was carrying arms for Burmese junta.

This month's UN resolution banned all arms trade by North Korea, except in small arms. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, an unnamed senior US defence official denied that the USS McCain intended to intercept the Kang Nam. He insisted that the US would strictly follow the UN resolution, which requires the consent of the flag state for any inspection. China and Russia pressed for the insertion of the requirement in the original US-drafted resolution.

President Obama, however, is under pressure from more militaristic layers of the American establishment to ignore the clause. The *Wall Street Journal* on June 23 called for the Kang Nam to be intercepted as it passed Singapore. Calling for forceful measures against Iran and North Korea, the newspaper concluded: "Mr. Obama no doubt wishes he could return to his campaign illusions about the powers of diplomacy. But the world's rogues have other priorities, and stopping them will take more than an extended handshake".

Responding to right-wing pressure, Obama told CBS on June 22: "This administration—and our military—is fully prepared for any contingencies". He was responding to a question about the possibility of North Korea launching a missile toward Hawaii in the coming weeks.

Washington has offered no evidence that Pyongyang is preparing to target the US. Yet the Pentagon has sent a ground-based mobile interceptor missile system and radar to Hawaii. Confirming that deployment, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates declared: "Without telegraphing what we will do, I would just say we are in a good position—should it become necessary—to protect American territory."

Any US interdiction of the Kang Nam would raise the danger of North Korean retaliation against South Korea or the US. The stationing of interceptor missiles in Hawaii could well be part of US preparations for such an eventuality. The boarding of the North Korean vessel would also heighten tensions between US and China, as both North Korea and Burma are Beijing's allies.

The USS McCain was recently involved in an incident involving a Chinese submarine during an exercise with South East Asian navies near the former US Subic Bay base in the Philippines. An underwater sonar being towed by the USS McCain collided with a Chinese submarine apparently sent to monitor the drill. The collision followed a confrontation in March between an American spy ship, the USNS Impeccable, and small Chinese coastal vessels in the South China Sea. The incidents highlight the growing naval rivalry between the two powers.

© World Socialist Web Site

Beijing has cautioned the US against any aggressive moves toward North Korean vessels. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang this week has called for "restraint," insisting there had to be sufficient evidence of banned arms trading before any action was taken.

China is caught in a dilemma over North Korea. On the one hand, its ally is a convenient regional buffer against the US and its allies, Japan and South Korea. Beijing has been reluctant to implement punitive sanctions that would provoke a major crisis in Pyongyang, in which Washington could intervene. On the other hand, North Korea's nuclear tests may provide a pretext for Japanese rearmament, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons—something that China wants to avoid.

A survey conducted by state-run *Global Times* of 20 top Chinese foreign policy experts in May found that half supported punishment of the Pyongyang regime, while the other half were opposed. Shi Yinhong from Renmin University called for aid to be cut to Pyongyang and the abrogation of the 1961 mutual defence treaty between the two countries. Zhan Debin from Fudan University, who also supported pressure on Pyongyang, warned that North Korea's actions could result in war on the Korean Peninsula.

In a separate comment, Wang Chong of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, wrote in the *Global Times*: "I recently had a talk with a senior US diplomat who told me clearly that if war breaks out on Korean Peninsula, the US will definitely take part because it has obligations to its ally South Korea. I then replied, 'So do China and North Korea. You know what it means'."

Wang insisted that China had to continue to support North Korea. "What would Pakistan think if China disengaged with North Korea?" he asked. "There are other reasons why China can't abandon North Korea. The country serves as a buffer zone to keep China from direct confrontation with the US."

China's major rival, Japan, is exploiting the North Korean nuclear "threat" to justify unpopular rearmament. The government proposed a law on Tuesday to allow the Japanese coastal guard and naval ships to intercept cargo ships allegedly carrying arms. Such measures would only inflame the tensions in North East Asia.

The Kyodo news agency reported that draft defence policy guidelines for 2010-2014 had reversed the previous focus on cutting military spending and personnel. According to *Asia Times*, a subcommittee of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s defence policy panel issued a 12-page proposal for the guidelines the day after the North Korean nuclear test. It argued that Japan should use cruise missiles in pre-emptive strikes against any launch preparations detected at the missile sites of a hostile nation.

While Japan is formally prevented under its so-called pacifist constitution from using force against other countries, Prime Minister Taro Aso is arguing that it is permissible to target missile sites. He recently told the parliament: "As long as it is evident that there are no other measures, striking the enemy's missile bases is guaranteed under the Constitution. It falls within the scope of self-defence. It's different from pre-emptive attacks."

North Korea's reckless actions only play directly into the hands of right-wing forces in the US, Japan and South Korea. Its limited nuclear weapons and missile capability, far from the defending the country, only provide the pretext for a military buildup and further provocations by the US and its allies in the region. Responding to Pyongyang's posturing about "wiping out" the US aggressors from the map, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell contemptuously dismissed the threat as "silliness".

Washington's aim at present appears to be to apply pressure to Beijing to pull North Korea into line. However, a miscalculation, for instance over the boarding of the North Korean vessel, has the potential to rapidly spiral out of control into a conflict that would draw in the major powers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site