

Korea: US provokes nuclear crisis

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On October 9, North Korea announced it had successfully carried out its first nuclear-weapons test, six days after announcing it intended to conduct such a test. The test was the culmination of nearly two years of hostility and provocation by the United States.

The February 13, 2005 New York Times revealed the existence of a US National Security Council “toolkit” for destabilising North Korea. It was based on the financial interdiction techniques developed in the “war on terror”.

Then, on September 19, 2005, Washington signed off on an agreement reached through the six-party talks involving China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the US. Under the deal, Washington agreed work to normalise its relations with North Korea, with which it has been officially at war since 1950 (a ceasefire was agreed in 1953).

In exchange, North Korea agreed to abandon its nuclear weapons program and return to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which it had left in 2003 in the face of a campaign of mounting hostility from Washington.

As part of his regime’s preparations for invading oil-rich Iraq in March 2003, in his January 2002 State of Union address US President George Bush branded North Korea, Iraq and Iran “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” with “weapons of mass destruction”.

In October 2002, Washington demanded that North Korea end its uranium enrichment program as a condition for any future dialogue between the two governments.

Under the NPT, North Korea was legally entitled to enrich uranium to provide fuel rods for its two small nuclear power plants at its Yongbyon nuclear research centre.

Two months later, the US suspended shipments of heavy oil fuel to North Korea, shipments that Washington had agreed in 1994 to supply in exchange for Pyongyang’s agreement to shut down its Yongbyon reactors.

North Korea responded in January 2003 by announcing plans to reactivate the dormant Yongbyon reactors, to withdraw from the NPT and to extract plutonium from spent nuclear fuel rods to create a “workable nuclear deterrent”.

Washington entered into the six-party talks in August 2003 hoping to rally Beijing and Moscow against Pyongyang, but over the course of the following two years Washington was pressed by Beijing, Moscow and Seoul into the September 2005 agreement.

Four days after its signing however Washington struck back, activating the National Security Council “toolkit” against North Korea. The US accused North Korea of producing counterfeit US\$100 notes and moved to pressure banks around the world to stop dealing with North Korea.

By November 2005, the six-party talks lay in ruins. When Seoul asked Washington for evidence of its accusations against North Korea, it was not until the following January that a junior US Treasury department official was dispatched to convince the South Koreans.

Seoul was not convinced by the case presented. Nor was the European Business Association which, in April, called on the US to end its financial sanctions against North Korea unless the counterfeiting allegations could be proven in court.

Such dubious accusations of criminality are the latest in a long series of campaigns by the US and its allies to demonise North Korea. In 2003, for example, Australia’s corporate media ran a frenzied scare campaign against alleged attempts by North Korea to smuggle heroin — after the drug was found in a grounded North Korean cargo ship off the Victorian coast. However, after a seven-month trial and 10 days’ deliberation, a Victorian Supreme Court jury in March found the ship’s crew innocent of charges of drug trafficking.

In late June, the US conducted its largest military exercises in the western Pacific since the end of its war against Vietnam in 1975, mobilising 22,000 troops, 280 warplanes and 28 warships. These exercises involved stationing two guided missile cruisers off the North Korean coast.

On July 5, Pyongyang responded — conducting multiple missile launch tests. Several short-range missiles and a long-range Taepodong-2 rocket were test fired.

A flurry of diplomatic manoeuvres and pressure followed, including condemnation by the UN Security Council and criticism by Pyongyang’s allies, China and Russia. Japan’s right-wing government responded by asserting Tokyo’s right to pre-emptive strikes against North Korea, a position spearheaded by Shinzo Abe, who was then cabinet secretary and who became Japan’s new PM on September 26.

Pyongyang is playing the nuclear card to try to force Washington to engage in bilateral talks as a prelude to the resumption of the six-party talks. With Beijing and Moscow backing this call following its October 3 announcement of its plan to conduct a nuclear test, Pyongyang undoubtedly felt it had nothing to lose and perhaps much to gain by demonstrating that it has some nuclear chips to bargain with.

For that is all Pyongyang’s Stalinist regime has ever wanted since the US first stoked up the confrontation over North Korea’s nuclear program back in November 1991. At that time, while then US war secretary Dick Cheney was visiting Seoul, Colin Powell, at that time Washington’s top military officer, told reporters that if Pyongyang had “missed Desert Storm, this is a chance to catch a rerun”.

But desperation is not limited to North Korea. Washington needs to continually stir up crises in northeast Asia for reasons that go to the heart of US military and geopolitical strategy. Essentially, Washington must continue to legitimise a large military presence in this strategically vital area of the world.

Northeast Asia is where the US imperialist rulers' only nuclear-armed rival military powers — China and Russia, which now regard each other as “strategic partners” — share a border. It is also the homeland of a major rival imperialist economic superpower, Japan.

A US military foothold on the Korean peninsula, which lies at the heart of this region, is also vital as a bridgehead into the eastern side of the vast Eurasian landmass.

However, recent geopolitical and economic developments in the region have put pressure on the US presence. China's booming capitalist economy threatens to create a new economic axis for regional industrial growth, including for South Korea which has traditionally been dependent on access to the US market.

The liberal wing of South Korea's capitalist ruling class has transformed domestic and inter-Korean politics in the last decade, consolidating a stable parliamentary democracy with power firmly entrenched in a civilian state bureaucracy rather than, as previously, in a military bureaucracy closely tied to the US occupation forces.

Over the past five years, this has deepened into a liberal makeover of politics and culture. Kim Dae-jung's “Sunshine Policy” towards North Korea was stubbed into the dust by Bush junior, but Kim's successor, current President Roh Moo-hyun, has persisted with a policy of dialogue and economic relations. Last year, trade between the two Korean states topped the US\$1 billion mark for the first time.

Seoul and Washington are currently wrangling over the terms of the US military presence in South Korea. Seoul is pushing for eventual command over its own forces in any war on the peninsula. This is a further sign of the desire of the now-dominant wing of the South Korean capitalist class to free itself from Washington's heavy-handed tutelage.

It is also reflected at the popular level. A February survey of 1000 South Koreans aged between 18 and 23 found nearly half believed Seoul should side with Pyongyang in the event of any US military attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities. Another 40% advocated neutrality.

US provocation in the region is most obviously directed against Pyongyang, but it also seeks to dampen Seoul's power of initiative in peninsular geopolitics and, in the process, revive the political fortunes of the anti-Pyongyang, pro-US wing of the South Korean ruling class in preparation for South Korea's December 2007 presidential election.

However, it is a gambit that may backfire on the US rulers, as those living in the region better appreciate the relationship of forces each faces. In such a delicate geopolitical confluence, no single power can prevail untrammelled.

Northeast Asia is not a gigantic US petrol bowser, like the Middle East; nor is it economically powerless. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether Beijing and Seoul can devise a counter-diplomacy that reduces the US role.

Ultimately, if Washington's influence in the region's diplomacy can be removed or at least neutralised, the other powers stand to gain from a peaceful reunification of Korea.

Pyongyang would like nothing more than to engage in the kind of controlled restoration of capitalism seen in neighbouring China. According to the October 9 Australian, a report recently prepared by the US Citigroup, the world's biggest bank, argues that North Korea's

“progress” in preparing for China-style “economic reforms has been way beyond our expectations”.

However, Korean reunification could also unleash a significant advance in the level of social struggle in Korea. A dramatic rise in social expectations in the north could combine with the decades-long accumulation of mass democratic and worker struggle experiences and victories in the south to produce peninsula-wide movements that reverberate around northeast Asia and the world.

In the wake of North Korea’s nuclear test, Washington, with Tokyo’s support, began trying to laying the basis for another, even more reckless, provocation against North Korea.

The UN Security Council’s July resolution bans international trade in ballistic missiles and nuclear technology with North Korea. However, it lacks any enforcement provision. On October 10 Washington began pressing the Security Council to adopt a resolution authorising US-led “inspections” of ships entering and leaving North Korea’s ports.

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