

The big power diplomacy behind North Korean nuclear crisis

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This act of rebellion will now be met with UN sanctions, definitely including a ban on luxury goods, trade, travel and financial transactions relating to the arms trade. Beyond this, however, the scope of the sanctions and any further action are still under debate. America's aims may be tempered by the varying interests of the other governments, who previously took part in six-party negotiations with North Korea - Russia, China, Japan and South Korea.

Of these, Japan is the most willing to 'get tough'. Previously North Korea's third largest trading partner, since the test, it has already banned all North Korean exports and citizens from entering Japan. Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, warned against pushing their government into a corner and partially excused the nuclear test on the basis that the negotiations adopted the wrong 'tone'.

A greater hindrance to the imperialists' plan, however, is posed by China and South Korea, both countries with expanding interests in North Korea. Since 1998, South Korea has pursued a 'sunshine strategy' to coax Kim Jong Il's regime into greater co-operation, the cost of which has been high. According to the opposition party, \$1.2 billion has been given to projects such as the Mount Kumkang resort just north of the border. Despite the US believing that this generates cash for the North's nuclear programme, the South Korean regime continues to defend its strategy.

South Korea is also cautious about sanctions, to which they have only reluctantly agreed. This reflects both short term priorities and long term goals. South Korea is directly threatened by the North's massive military presence. The South's strategy is to encourage gradual change, while maintaining stability in the North: hence their massive food aid programme.

This stands in sharp contrast to the US strategy to isolate the North. For the South, this raises the prospect of the collapse of the regime, followed by unification, which would impose unbearable economic costs. This conflict was highlighted last month, when the Washington pressured Seoul to join its Proliferation Security Initiative, an alliance directed against the North.

China's co-operation

By contrast, China, expected by some to be the biggest obstacle to US plans, has been much more open to co-operation. Beijing is anxious to maintain its role as an intermediary between the Bush administration and the North, but this only partly explains calls on Kim Jong Il to stop the development of nuclear weapons. Another factor is the fear that Japan and South Korea might decide to follow suit, leaving China surrounded with potentially hostile states possessing nuclear weapons.

Unlike the US, China is not pushing for regime change in North Korea, where she currently has important economic interests. For example, Chinese state-owned companies are proposing to invest more than

\$880m in an iron-ore mine near the Chinese border. While China will support the imposition of sanctions in principle, she will not approve of the severity of US proposals. A collapse of the already precarious North Korean economy would terrify the Chinese state, particularly given the potential for mass migration across the 1,400km border. There is already unrest in China's north eastern provinces, caused by widespread layoffs in state-owned industries.

A crisis in North Korea thus poses an immense threat of destabilisation and crisis in the region. Such fears extend beyond China, with Western analysts also worrying that an isolated North Korea might 'behave even more badly' or that sanctions would trigger its collapse and unleash nuclear mayhem. The conflicting viewpoints of the big players, far from representing different moral stances on nuclear proliferation, are all closely tied to economic and diplomatic interests.

For the Bush administration the main fear is that the arming of North Korea will challenge US hegemony across the region and give confidence to Iran to continue her development of nuclear weapons. The US is therefore pushing for the harshest possible measures, rediscovering rhetoric about the 'axis of evil' to encourage support for this stance. It is also seeking to use the situation as a lever to bring China, a potentially rival state, under its wing in a struggle against common enemies.

By acquiescing in the adoption of sanctions, Beijing has maintained its decades-long policy of never directly confronting Washington's interests. This is essential because of China's economic dependency on the US. At the same time, Beijing has been careful to reassert its position as the key negotiator with the North.

At the core of all this is the America's role as the world's strongest imperialist superpower, the self-appointed global policeman that is itself above the law. This superpower uses its immense military might to push through its neoliberal economic agenda: tearing down every barrier to trade, enforcing privatisation, and attacking trade union and workers' rights. Any regime that politically, militarily or economically challenges this hegemony becomes a target.

North Korea, as a relic of the Stalinist bureaucratically planned economies of the twentieth century, is certainly such a regime. While condemning its despotic leadership, socialists must defend its right to stand up to imperialist domination, to organise its economy on the basis of planning not profit, and to possess nuclear weapons just as the imperialist states do.

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