The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Foreign Aggressors Target North Korea Again

by David Wall

David Wall teaches at the East Asia Institute of the University of Cambridge and is associate fellow (Asia) at the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

CAMBRIDGE, England -- The war of words goes on. U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has warned the North Korean government that any aggressive activity on the Korean Peninsula sponsored by North Korea would be met by a "devastating response."

Presumably that is a threat of military action by the United States. At the June 2 press conference in Seoul in which he made the threat, Wolfowitz also said he takes seriously Pyongyang's claims to have developed nuclear weapons. He added, however, that U.S. intelligence is unable to confirm whether North Korea possesses any weapons of mass destruction.

The thing is, the North Korean government has never claimed publicly that it has any nuclear weapons or that it is engaged in uranium enrichment or plutonium production.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific James Kelly claims that the North Koreans told him that they have weapons and are working to develop more. But no one has corroborated Kelly's claims, which are denied by Pyongyang.

Kelly's claims were ramped up by the U.S. government to a categorical statement by President George W. Bush at the recent Group of Eight summit, supported by other G-8 leaders, that "North Korea's uranium enrichment and production programs . . . are a clear breach of its international obligations."

What obligations? Taking a leaf out of the Bush administration's book, North Korea has pulled out of all its international obligations. It has none.

And now another U.S. delegation to Pyongyang assures us that its North Korean interlocutors told them, yes, we do have nuclear weapons and are engaged in enriching uranium and producing plutonium. But again, there is no non-U.S. corroboration of this claim.

South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun has trashed claims that North Korea has nuclear weapons, or even the capability to develop them. U.S. intelligence is also unable to confirm them.

In London, a British diplomat who recently returned from North Korea after spending two years opening up the British Embassy in Pyongyang, also said there is no evidence that North Korea has any weapons of mass destruction, and even if it had, the state of the country's basic infrastructure makes it unlikely that they could be deployed.

Jim Hoare, who traveled extensively in North Korea monitoring food aid, also doubts that North Korean conventional forces along the demilitarized zone pose as much of a threat to South Korea as is often claimed.

What we do know is that the North Korean government claims the right to develop whatever weaponry it deems necessary to defend itself against what it sees as an increasingly likely preemptive strike against the nuclear-energy facilities it does have.

In a long and well-presented press release issued by the North Korean official news agency on May 12, the North Korean government made its position clear on the "nuclear-war crisis" that it argues the "U.S. is wholly accountable for."

The press release states that: "The DPRK (North Korea) will increase its self-defense capacity strong enough

to destroy aggressors at a single stroke. Any U.S. aerial attack will be decisively countered with aerial attack and its land strategy will be coped with land strategy." You will seek hard to find a better statement of the North Korean position.

Although Pyongyang has a way with words, frequently sounding off with loud rhetorical flourishes about the devastating consequences if this or that happened, this is the first time it has been calmly specific. No threats of attacks on Seoul or U.S. bases. Just an assertion that it will defend itself against attack from U.S. forces in the strongest way that it can. What's wrong with that?

Now you know and I know that any defense that the North Koreans can put up against a U.S. attack is not credible. But the North Koreans don't know that -- apart, that is, from leader Kim Jong Il and his closest cronies.

The average North Korean accepts Kim's military-first policy, which commits a quarter of the country's meager income to defense. He accepts it because he remembers, or rather he is not allowed to forget, that both the Japanese and the U.S. each destroyed North Korea (illegally) once within living memory; they are repeatedly told that it could, is even likely to, happen again.

The U.S. and the Japanese feed this understandable paranoia with the sort of statements that Wolfowitz recently made in Seoul, that Bush made in Evian, France, and in St. Petersburg, Russia, and that Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made in Tokyo.

Koizumi has added his increasingly nationalistic and militaristic voice to the clamor coming out of Washington aimed at regime change in North Korea. Koizumi has been massaging Japanese politicians over the past few weeks to get them to support his proposals for changing the legal framework and constitutional situation of the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

Koizumi wants the JSDF to be turned into a force of aggression against countries that he sees as threatening Japan. He no longer wants to rely on the U.S. umbrella and wants Japan to be able to carry out preemptive strikes against what he considers to be threatening military installations, even if there is no hard evidence that there are hostile intentions against Japan.

I think I know which country the North Koreans think Koizumi has in mind.

And if you were the leader of that country, wouldn't you want to persuade impressionable American visitors that you are stronger than you are and that you mean to do everything you can to defend yourself? I would.

This article appeared in The Japan Times, June 20, 2003.

Created by Datamomentum