

Containing nuclear North Korea

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Intercepting shipping imports to North Korea will not bring the nuclear crisis to an end, but it could buy us some vital time

Moves to intercept shipping bound for Pyongyang are back under discussion after North Korea tested a second nuclear device on 25 May. The UN security council is reportedly considering adding to the sanctions agreed after the regime detonated its first nuclear weapon in October 2006. One of the options may be to authorise military interdictions under the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a loose "coalition of the willing" created in 2003 during the Bush administration.

PSI participants co-operate to try to intercept cargoes of suspected banned weapons, their means of delivery and other related materials. They also enact laws to facilitate seizure of such materials and take part in interdiction exercises and actual operations. With the addition of South Korea, which was previously an observer nation in interdiction drills, 95 countries on six continents are now PSI participants. Pyongyang has responded by warning of an "immediate, strong military measures" if South Korea stops and searches any of its ships.

Could the PSI be utilised to enforce a blockade of North Korea? Blockades have been used in nuclear diplomacy before, with President John F Kennedy imposing one around Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. In this contemporary crisis, a blockade is no easy task given that Pyongyang has a history of procurement and proliferation via a variety of land, sea and air routes. Uranium enrichment equipment from the AQ Khan network, for example, was supplied along the Karakoram highway, which runs across northern China from Pakistan in the west to North Korea in the east. Pakistan has received missile-related shipments from the North via the same highway and through air shipments.

North Korea's maritime trading routes are the most vulnerable to interdiction and several cargo vessels have been tracked and intercepted in the last decade, including So San (2002), BBC China (2003) and Ville de Virgo (2003). However, these either pre-date PSI or were part of existing law enforcement practices and it remains unclear whether the initiative has resulted in the boarding of a single North Korean ship since it was launched. US officials claim that dozens of interdictions have taken place slowing nuclear and missile programs in Asia and the Middle East, but provide few specifics.

The political and operational obstacles to mounting a blockade against North Korea remain formidable. The support or permission of the surrounding countries would be required to intercept all suspicious cargo travelling by road or rail and successfully divert air traffic entering or leaving North Korean territory or airspace. China in particular remains suspicious of the PSI and has previously pledged only to "inspect" rather than "interdict" cargo destined for the North.

The legality of vessel interdiction in international law is also still a point of contention. Under security council resolution 1718 two suspect vessels were boarded and searched in Hong Kong and India in 2006, although no prohibited technology or equipment was discovered. However, the resolution does not allow the use of force to intercept suspect cargo and President Obama may now seek this in a more robustly worded UN decision.

So-called "soft" proliferation (the transfer of technical drawings, blueprints, data, intellectual property, knowledge and expertise and financial transactions) provides another challenge. Transferred electronically or through direct person-to-person contact this type of activity is much less easily identified, tracked and intercepted. And as more legitimate supply routes are closed down, and procurement efforts move from legal

to grey or illicit markets the task becomes even harder.

Solid working partnerships under the rubric of the PSI also appear thin on the ground and outside of Nato's Shipping Centre (which does not have a specific counter-proliferation remit) there is little evidence of the diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement and military force components being integrated to good effect. Moreover, the PSI cannot "turn back the clock" and eliminate the nuclear facilities and missile systems already constructed, or North Korea's indigenous WMD developmental capability.

North Korea also has the capability to raise the political and economic costs of PSI interdiction, possibly to levels that many participating states will consider outweigh the benefits. Ultimately, it will take a political settlement to resolve the underlying conflict over North Korea's nuclear programme. The PSI will at best only be partially effective in intercepting shipments of nuclear and missile hardware and does not offer a permanent solution to the crisis. However, if implemented successfully as part of an effective multilateral containment strategy, it could be used to buy that much needed commodity: time.

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