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STS.092 – Current Events from an STS Perspective
3.4.2003

When Should the United States Start Seriously Worrying about North Korea?

On Monday, March 3rd, it was revealed by United States military officials that late Saturday night, March 1st, four North Korean fighter jets intercepted an unarmed United States Air Force reconnaissance plane on a surveillance mission over the Sea of Japan. The fighters shadowed the spy plane for 22 minutes in international airspace about 150 miles off the North Korean coast, said a Pentagon spokesman. But even though there were no radio communications or shots fired between the American and North Korean aircraft, the situation was rather tense as one North Korean fighter came within 50 feet of the plane while waving at U.S. pilots to leave the area.

The North Koreans believe that our country is flying increased reconnaissance missions above the territorial waters in the East Sea in preparation for war. On Saturday, the official North Korean news agency said “All these espionage flights and air war games clearly indicate the desperate efforts of the U.S. to start a war against [the North].” It is not clear to me whether or not our reconnaissance was or was not truly in international waters and the fact that the release of this report was delayed by two days does not make me wholly trust U.S. military officials. Regardless, this incident is the latest development in the current thread of interactions with North Korea.

Washington sees this set of interactions as a series of provocations by North Korea in its quest to build a nuclear arsenal in defiance of American and international protests. North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Il, maintains that North Korea’s nuclear program has peaceful purposes and does not pose a threat to anybody. However, this line of reasoning is difficult to agree with as Kim Gong Il has warned the United States that nuclear war could break out if the U.S. attacks his country’s nuclear program.

President Bush is absolutely convinced that the conflict can be resolved peacefully but has been pressed recently by hard-liners to try and further isolate North Korea and hope that the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il will either give in to the demands of the United States or collapse. Some administration officials believe that Kim Jong Il hopes to set off crisis to extract concessions from Washington in an attempt to save face and not admit that their economic state is dire. However you look at it, nobody knows what will happen when North Korea starts making nuclear weapons at the pace of one per month from now until the summer. They have the capacity to achieve this since they recently reactivated a reprocessing plant that can produce weapons-grade plutonium from their country's stockpile of 8,000 spent fuel rods.

Furthermore, North Korea will have opportunities to sell this plutonium to a rogue state or to terrorists. This means that the manufacturing of weapons-grade plutonium in North Korea cannot be considered an isolated issue from current events regarding Iraq and terrorist factions led by Osama bin Laden (remember him?).

President Bush does not want to distract international attention from Iraq, but stated that the United States has "no intention of invading" and that he would keep "all military options open." The problem with this passive stance is that North Korea will escalate this conflict right up to the red line without blinking and the U.S. could find itself in the middle of another Cold War in a matter of months.

One American official predicts, "At the end of this, [Kim Jong Il] may get one of two things he doesn't have now: a good-sized nuclear arsenal, like Pakistan's, or direct talks with the United States."

My questions to STS are: What will happen when the bomb-making starts? Will the United States engage in talks and concede to North Korea or will we attempt to call

Mr. Kim's bluff and run the risk of a war that could lead to, according to Mr. Kim, nuclear action. North Korea *does* have a history of intensifying statements before United States military exercises like the annual exercise scheduled for March 19th in South Korea involving counter-insurgency. Will all this tension blow over after the exercise? Will President Bush maintain a devotion to a peaceful resolution or will he get just as trigger-happy as he is currently with Iraq?

All of these questions need answers, and quick, because North Korea shows no signs of backing off. The entirety of the global community is affected by North Korea's actions and should not leave it up to the United States alone to police this situation.