US general menaces North Korea with the “military option”

Peter Symonds
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A provocative threat against North Korea by the top US general in South Korea is a clear indication that President Obama intends to continue the Bush administration's belligerent stance toward Pyongyang.

Speaking to journalists on Monday, General Walter Sharp, head of the US armed forces in South Korea, warned North Korea against test firing its long-range Taepodong 2 missile. "We call on North Korea to stop provocations and act like a responsible country," he declared.

Asked how the US intended to respond if a missile test took place, General Sharp bluntly warned: "We have all available options open to us. That includes everything from diplomatic to economic sanctions, to military options. Of course we very much want the military option to be the last to be taken but those options are all open to us."

The threat follows claims by US officials last week to have satellite imagery that showed North Korea was preparing to test the Taepodong 2. State Department spokesman Robert Wood condemned any North Korean ballistic missile launch as "unhelpful, and, frankly, provocative". Pyongyang has not denied preparations for such a test.

Tensions over the missile test have arisen amid deteriorating relations between North and South Korea. While the US and international media has focussed attention on Pyongyang's denunciations of Seoul, the real source of the frictions lies in the decision by South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to cut off much-needed supplies of food, fertiliser and other aid to North Korea.

Lee's right-wing Grand National Party has bitterly opposed the previous Sunshine Policy, which sought to use aid to open up North Korea as a cheap labour platform. He insists that any future aid be tied to progress in North Korea's denuclearisation—as judged by his government. Lee's decision to inflame tensions with Pyongyang is in part an attempt to divert public attention from the crisis at home. Having won the presidency with grand promises to turn South Korea into an economic superpower, Lee is now presiding over an economy predicted to contract by 4 percent this year.

North Korea has responded angrily. On January 30, Pyongyang announced the scrapping of all military and political agreements with Seoul, accusing Lee of pushing the two sides toward conflict. Last weekend, the official press denounced the South Korean government for driving the situation to "the brink of war". North Korea's overblown rhetoric is directly related to the Stalinist regime's own fragile domestic position and its lack of any other political or diplomatic leverage.

In this context, General Sharp's sabre rattling in South Korea, which appears to be condoned by the White House, can only exacerbate an already fraught situation. While US military action against North Korea in response to a missile test appears unlikely, the threat does signal, not only to North Korea, but to all of the regional powers, particularly China, that the Obama administration will aggressively pursue US interests in North East Asia.

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Formally, the Obama administration is still reviewing its policy toward North Korea. However, there are indications that it will maintain a tough uncompromising approach, as a part of a broader regional strategy. Bruce Klinger, an analyst at the right-wing Heritage Foundation, told the *Los Angeles Times* on Sunday that the Obama administration "might not be as conciliatory as expected. The administration has indicated that it will not accept North Korea as a nuclear state and that it must follow through with a complete and verifiable denuclearisation."

Last year, US insistence on "full verification" almost brought the North Korean denuclearisation agreement, reached at six-party talks in February 2007, to the point of collapse. By mid-2008, North Korea had shutdown nuclear facilities, handed over a report on its nuclear programs and, as a sign of good faith, demolished the cooling tower of its nuclear reactor. The US, however, refused to keep its side of the bargain by removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, insisting instead on tough new verification procedures that were not part of the deal. Pyongyang began to restart its nuclear plants and threatened to pull out of the agreement altogether before the Bush administration relented.

US threats against North Korea have never simply been directed against Pyongyang. The Bush administration repeatedly raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula as a means of justifying its continued military presence in South Korea and Japan, and also cutting across the regional plans of rival powers, especially China.

As its occupation of Iraq turned into a disaster, compelling it to focus attention on the Middle East, Washington accepted Beijing's offer to cool the conflict with North Korea by convening the six-party talks that began in August 2003. The long and tortuous negotiations involving the US, the two Koreas, China, Japan and Russia finally produced the February 2007 agreement for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear facilities in return for economic aid and diplomatic recognition.

The precise stance that Obama will take on North Korea remains to be seen. But it is already clear that his administration is placing North East Asia far higher on the list of priorities than under President Bush. Hillary Clinton's first trip abroad as secretary of state, to take place next week, will be to Japan, China and South Korea, as well as Indonesia. In comments yesterday, Clinton criticised Pyongyang's "unacceptable behaviour" and made clear that it would be high on her agenda during talks in all countries. The key discussions will take place in Beijing where US demands for China to rein in its North Korean ally, on top of threats of economic retaliation over trade and currency issues, may signal rising US-China tensions.

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