

Obama moves aggressively against North Korea

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The US administration has signalled a more aggressive stance toward North Korea that will only compound an already tense situation in North East Asia.

Speaking in France on Saturday, President Obama declared that the US would take “a very hard look” at its approach following North Korea’s second nuclear test last month. Accusing Pyongyang of “constantly destabilising the region,” he ruled out any effort to encourage North Korea to return to talks, saying: “We are not intending to continue a policy of rewarding provocation.”

Obama’s comments recall the hard-line rhetoric of President George W. Bush, who repeatedly declared that he would not “reward North Korea for bad behaviour”. One of Obama’s chief strategists told the *New York Times* that the US president had no intention of offering North Korea further incentives to adhere to previous deals to dismantle its nuclear facilities. “[President Bill] Clinton bought it once, Bush bought it again, and we’re not going to buy it a third time.”

In reality, the US offered North Korea few “rewards” in the 1994 Agreed Framework or the agreement reached in six-party talks in 2007. President Bush effectively destroyed the Agreed Framework when he came to office, declaring in 2002 that North Korea was part of an “axis of evil” with Iraq and Iran. The Bush administration’s own deal with Pyongyang insisted that its nuclear facilities be shut down then dismantled, in return for limited economic aid and the eventual restoration of full international diplomatic and economic relations.

The 2007 agreement broke down last December. North Korea had kept its side of the bargain, by shutting down and beginning to dismantle its nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon. The Bush administration, however, only reluctantly took the first step of taking North Korea off the US State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism and continued to insist on new verification measures before further steps were taken.

The Obama administration has continued the same policy and taken no initiative to restart the six-party talks, involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas. North Korea, which is

confronting a desperate economic crisis, has always regarded the ending of its international isolation, including the protracted US economic blockade, as the crucial aspect of any agreement. Stymied by the US, Pyongyang restarted its nuclear facilities, then fired a long-range ballistic missile in April and its second nuclear test last month.

Washington is now seeking to use the nuclear test to intensify pressure on North Korea through a new UN Security Council resolution and its own unilateral action. Speaking on ABC TV on Sunday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated that US plans included the interdiction of ships and aircraft suspected of carrying so-called illicit North Korean goods and steps to choke off its access to the international banking and financial system.

“We will do everything we can to both interdict it and prevent it and shut off their flow of money,” Clinton said. “If we do not take significant and effective action against the North Koreans now, we’ll spark an arms race in Northeast Asia. I don’t think anybody wants to see that.”

The US circulated a draft resolution to UN Security Council members last Thursday that would require countries to search all North Korean cargo passing through airports and seaports if there were “reasonable grounds” to believe it contained banned equipment. It would also authorise UN members to inspect ships at sea, as long as they had the consent of the flag state, and to “seize and dispose” of banned military equipment.

The draft resolution urges UN member states to cut loans, financial assistance and grants to North Korea and its suppliers for programs linked to military programs. In 2005, the Bush administration blacklisted the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia for involvement in alleged North Korean counterfeiting and smuggling activity, leading to the freezing of \$24 million in North Korean accounts. The US now wants to considerably expand such measures.

China, in particular, has resisted the latest draft resolution. In 2006, following the first North Korean nuclear test, it opposed similar US moves to give a UN imprimatur to the interdiction of North Korean goods on the high seas—a breach of international law. As well as its concerns over heightening tensions with

Pyongyang, both Beijing and Moscow feared that Washington would use the resolution to justify the wider use of such powers. In 2003, the Bush administration and its allies established the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) as a mechanism for searching ships and aircraft purportedly to prevent the spread of “weapons of mass destruction”.

Clinton’s reference to the dangers of “an arms race in Northeast Asia” is directed at pressuring China to take strong action against North Korea, its formal ally. Previously Beijing has been reluctant to take tough measures against Pyongyang, fearing that the collapse of the crisis-ridden Stalinist regime would only provide openings for the US and its allies, South Korea and Japan, to exploit. At the same time, China is concerned that North Korea’s reckless actions could provide the pretext for Japan and South Korea to boost their military capabilities, including the possible building of nuclear weapons. Clinton is playing on these fears.

Last week, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg visited Beijing to discuss measures against North Korea. He was accompanied by Treasury Undersecretary Stuart Levey who was instrumental in orchestrating the blacklisting of Banco Delta Asia in 2005 as well as a similar campaign against Iran. Beijing’s support for financial sanctions against North Korea or the interdiction of North Korean goods is essential, as China accounts for more than 70 percent of North Korea’s trade. Despite Washington’s arm twisting, however, China is yet to agree to the US draft Security Council resolution.

Secretary of State Clinton also suggested on Sunday that Washington might reverse the only step taken by the US toward normalising relations with North Korea. She told ABC TV that the State Department was examining whether Pyongyang should be placed back on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Given that North Korea was only removed last August, Clinton’s comments highlight the cynical character of the list. Whether a country is branded a “state sponsor of terror” depends entirely on whether or not it suits Washington’s geopolitical interests.

The US media has also seized on the detention of two American journalists in North Korea as the occasion for a renewed campaign of vilification. Their conviction on Monday on charges of illegal entry and unspecified hostile acts toward North Korea has produced a spate of articles denouncing Pyongyang for exploiting the journalists as bargaining chips and describing in detail the horrors of the “North Korean gulag”. There is no question that North Korea is a repressive Stalinist police-state. However, such media campaigns—like the demonisation of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein—are always aimed at corraling public opinion behind the broader strategic ambitions of US imperialism.

North Korea has responded to US moves with a new bout of empty demagoguery. After South Korea declared that it would join the PSI initiative, Pyongyang declared the 1953 Armistice that ended the Korean War was null and void and threatened military reprisals in response to any attempt to board its vessels. On

Tuesday, the state media warned of “a merciless offensive” in retaliation “to those who touch the country’s dignity and sovereignty even a bit”. Such posturing only provides the US and its allies with a convenient pretext for further menacing North Korea. Yesterday, South Korea for the first time announced the imposition of financial sanctions against three North Korean companies. South Korea’s right-wing president, Lee Myung-bak, is due in Washington next week for talks.

While Clinton declared that the US was open to a resumption of negotiations with North Korea, there are signs that Obama is adopting a more belligerent strategy than Bush. According to the *New York Times* on Monday, the administration has concluded that North Korea no longer wants an agreement with the US and is seeking to become a fully-fledged nuclear state. “This entirely changes the dynamic of how you deal with them,” a senior national security aide told the newspaper.

The *New York Times* did not spell out the implications. However, if, as Obama has already made clear, the US will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea, then what is on the agenda is regime change in Pyongyang. Writing in the *Washington Post* on Monday, Henry Kissinger hinted as much when he suggested that Obama had to get China on side with a combination of threats—the prospect of a nuclear-armed Japan—and assurances.

“If the Pyongyang regime is destabilised, the future of Northeast Asia would then have to be settled by deeply concerned parties amid a fast-moving crisis. They [China] need to know the American attitude and clarify their own for that contingency. A sensitive, thoughtful dialogue with China, rather than peremptory demands is essential,” Kissinger wrote. While not part of the Obama administration, the former secretary of state’s comments do point to the discussions underway in the US foreign policy establishment.

It is a reckless, high-risk strategy that has the potential to spiral out of control.



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