

Naval clash between two Koreas as Obama heads to Asia

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Just days before US President Barack Obama commences his first major visit to Asia, a brief exchange of fire took place between South Korean and North Korean naval vessels on Tuesday morning in disputed waters to the west of the Korean peninsula. The clash highlights the continuing sharp tensions in North East Asia, fuelled in no small part by Washington's determination to remain the dominant power in the region.

There is no independent account of the incident. North Korea claims to have sent a patrol boat to check "an unidentified object" on its side of the border. While returning, the vessel was chased and fired on by South Korean ships in what it described as a "grave armed provocation". Pyongyang has demanded an apology.

South Korea insisted the North Korean ship crossed the so-called Northern Limited Line in the Yellow Sea. When South Korean vessels fired warning shots, the North Korean ship responded by firing on the South Korean boats. Seoul claims that the North Korean vessel was badly damaged in the firefight. The incident lasted only ten minutes.

In October, the North Korean navy accused South Korea of sending warships across the maritime border to stir up tensions and warned of retaliations.

The Northern Limited Line was unilaterally declared by US-led UN forces in 1953 at the end of the Korean War. The demarcation was not part of the armistice treaty and was never accepted by Pyongyang. In 1999, North Korea declared its own demarcation of the disputed waters, leading to two deadly clashes. In 1999, at least 17 North Korean sailors were killed in a naval fire fight and, in 2002, four South Koreans and about 30 North Koreans died in another skirmish.

The international media immediately blamed the latest incident on North Korea's provocative behaviour and speculated as to its connection to Obama's visit. While it is possible that Pyongyang has deliberately heightened tensions with Seoul, it cannot be ruled out that the South Korean administration of President Lee Myung-bak provoked the clash

for its own purposes. He placed the South Korean military on high alert, raising fears of possible further clashes. Lee, a member of the right-wing Grand National Party, takes a tougher line than his immediate predecessors on economic and diplomatic engagement with North Korea.

Washington sought to play down the incident. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters in Singapore yesterday: "We are certainly counselling calm and caution when it comes to any type of dispute, especially ones that cause repercussions and damage that could be quite difficult to contend with."

The US is concerned to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula, at least for now, for several reasons. The most immediate is Obama's visit, due to start in Tokyo tomorrow. While North Korea and its nuclear programs will certainly be discussed during the tour, Washington is seeking to focus on more pressing matters, particularly economic relations with China. More broadly, the Obama administration has effectively put North Korea on the backburner as it prepares for a major escalation of the war in Afghanistan and intensifies pressure on Iran over its nuclear programs.

Clinton insisted that the naval clash between the two Koreas would not alter plans, announced this week, to send US special envoy Stephen Bosworth to North Korea. The decision, she explained, had been taken after "extensive consultations" with US partners in the so-called six-party talks with North Korea—that is, Japan, China, South Korea and Russia. A date has not been fixed, but Bosworth's visit is likely to take place before the end of the year.

Bosworth's mission is to press North Korea to return to the six-party talks on its nuclear programs. The visit is a minor face-saving concession to Pyongyang, which has been calling for a bilateral meeting with the US since early November. Earlier this year North Korea withdrew from the six-party negotiations, declaring it would never return. In April, North Korea tested a long-range ballistic missile, then in May carried out a second nuclear test.

Under pressure from China, the North Korean regime has been signalling its willingness to resume talks. In August, former US president Bill Clinton visited Pyongyang to broker the release of two American journalists arrested inside North Korea. Following a visit by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao to Pyongyang in October, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il indicated that Pyongyang would again participate in six-party talks.

The Obama administration has not, however, altered its hard-line approach to North Korea. Speaking to the Brookings Institution last week, Jeff Bader, senior Asian director at the National Security Council, insisted that the US would not buy the same deal with North Korea “for a third time”. While praising China’s role for pushing North Korea back to the negotiating table, Bader declared: “We are not interested in indulging North Korea’s dream of validation as a self-proclaimed nuclear power.”

In reality, the apparent consensus between Washington and Beijing on North Korea is illusory. Since the early 1990s, successive US administrations have exploited the North Korean nuclear issue to repeatedly destabilise relations in North East Asia and to justify the continued large US military presence in Japan, South Korea and the Western Pacific, which is directed primarily against China, not North Korea. The US is also using North Korea as the pretext for building an anti-ballistic missile shield with Japan in the Pacific.

The Clinton administration brought the Korean peninsula to the brink of full-blown war before backing off and signing the Agreed Framework in 1994 with North Korea, under which Pyongyang shut down its nuclear facilities in return for supplies of fuel oil, the construction of two power reactors and the eventual normalisation of relations. Beyond providing fuel oil, the US did not keep its side of the bargain.

On assuming office, the Bush administration immediately froze relations with North Korea while it conducted a lengthy review. Tensions rapidly escalated after Bush in 2002 declared North Korea to be part of an “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and Iran. Later that year, Washington used allegations of a secret North Korean uranium enrichment program to effectively nullify the Agreed Framework. North Korea responded by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, expelling international inspectors and restarting its reactor at Yongbyon.

The Bush administration only reluctantly agreed to six-party talks sponsored by China in 2003 after it became apparent that its invasion of Iraq was turning into a military quagmire. Any agreement at the talks was repeatedly stymied by US provocations. An initial de-nuclearisation agreement in 2005

broke down after the US used allegations of illicit money laundering to press for the freezing of North Korean assets in a Macau-based bank. North Korea carried out its first primitive nuclear test in 2006.

An agreement reached in 2007 suffered a similar fate. Washington promised to provide energy aid and move toward normalising relations with Pyongyang, in exchange for North Korea’s dismantling of its nuclear facilities. While North Korea shut down and began to dismantle its reactor and reprocessing plant, the US dragged out its first reciprocal action—taking North Korea off the State Department’s list of terrorist sponsoring nations. Talks broke down completely last December after the Bush administration insisted on additional verification procedures not contained in the agreement.

As on every other issue, the Obama administration has continued Bush’s policy toward North Korea. The US has made no serious effort to restart the six-party talks, using the same verification demand as the pretext. After North Korea’s second nuclear test in May, the US and Japan pushed through harsh new UN sanctions on North Korea. The declaration by US National Security Council adviser Bader that North Korea must carry out its commitments ignores the fact that the US repeatedly failed to keep its side of the bargain in deals with Pyongyang.

The Obama administration’s decision this week to dispatch special envoy Bosworth to Pyongyang is not a sign of any new willingness to engage with North Korea. Rather by playing along with China’s efforts to restart the six party talks, the US will no doubt be looking for something in return in next week’s horse-trading in Beijing. The naval clash on Tuesday in the Yellow Sea is a fresh reminder of the potential consequences of Washington’s continued stoking of tensions on the Korean peninsula.



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