US and China in a diplomatic standoff over North Korea

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A continuing tense diplomatic standoff between US and China is a further sign that the Obama administration is exploiting the tensions on the Korean peninsula, inflamed by last week's exchange of shelling between the two Koreas, to intensify American pressure against China.

The US and its allies have completely endorsed Seoul's account and blamed North Korea for the supposedly unprovoked shelling that killed two marines and two civilians on Yeonpyeong Island on November 23. Pyongyang, however, has insisted that its shelling was a countermeasure against South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea, during which shells were fired into North Korea's territory. Far from accepting either story, China has insisted the incident remains to be verified. State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who visited Pyongyang last weekend, said South Korea's shelling had caused "significant damage" to the north.

While repeatedly demanding that China intervene to contain North Korea, Washington and its allies have rebuffed China's diplomatic efforts to calm the Korean confrontation. Last Sunday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton phoned Chinese State Councilor Dai to urge Beijing to send what the State Department called "a strong message" that Pyongyang "cannot misinterpret".

The US along with its allies, South Korea and Japan, have rejected China's requests for an emergency meeting to restart the six-party talks, initially sponsored by Beijing to ease tensions over Pyongyang's nuclear programs. On Tuesday, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs declared: "The United States and a host of others, I don't think, are not interested in stabilising the region through a series of PR activities." Instead, the US, South Korea and Japan are planning to hold their own meeting in Washington next week.

The chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, added on Wednesday: "Beijing's call for consultations will not substitute for action and I do not believe we should continue to reward North Korea's provocative and destabilising behaviour with bargaining or new incentives." Such remarks are intensifying the danger of war on the Korean peninsula.

With strong US backing, and amid mounting pressure from his own right-wing Grand National Party (GNP), South Korean President Lee Myung-bak delivered a televised speech on Monday in which he threatened that "North Korea will pay the price in the event of further provocations."

South Korean Defence Minister Kim Tae-young resigned last week after criticism that he did not react aggressively enough to the North Korean shelling. Both ruling and opposition lawmakers declared that he should have ordered the air force to bomb North Korean artillery batteries. Kim's dismissal signaled a shift in Lee's government. Seoul has brought more heavy artillery and extra troops to bolster the 3,000 already stationed on Yeonpyeong Island.

Seoul has also changed its military rules of engagement. Previous rules allowed South Korean forces only to respond in kind—if the north fired artillery, the south would answer fire—in order to prevent an incident from escalating. Now the South Korean military has been authorised to respond with greater force, threatening to trigger a wider conflict.

Just as US-South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea concluded on Wednesday, South Korean officials held discussions with the US about staging another major

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military exercise this month. Next Monday, South Korea will hold its own live-fire naval drills around the peninsula, including in waters that have remained in dispute with North Korea. A live-fire exercise with US warships off Yeonpyeong Island was called off on Wednesday just hours before the scheduled time, after Pyongyang warned that such a drill would lead to "all-out war".

The North Korean crisis has provided a convenient political diversion for Lee, amid signs of a slowing economy and growing social unrest. Just a week before the shelling incident, 50 protesting Hyundai Motor temporary workers were arrested when riot police attacked a plant occupation in Ulsan. Last weekend, thousands of workers in other factories staged a sit-in protest to support Hyundai workers. These struggles are a sign of the rising discontent among South Korea's 5.3 million low-paid temporary workers.

Deeply concerned about instability in the Korean peninsula, Beijing has warned the US not to escalate the tensions. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi declared on Wednesday: "Showing power and confrontation is not a solution to problems and is not in the interests of related parties." He called on the US to consider that the relationship between US and China was "not a zero sum game"—in other words, a confrontation in which one country's gain was the other's loss.

Beijing refused to support an American, British and French motion, backed by South Korea and Japan, in the UN Security Council this week to condemn North Korea's shelling. Implicitly threatening to use its veto power, China reportedly opposed the inclusion of any wording, such as "condemn" or "violation", that was critical of North Korea.

An indication of the discussion in China's ruling circles was revealed by the comments of five analysts invited by the state-run *Global Times* to comment last week on the "worst scenarios". Zhang Zuqian of the Shanghai Institute of East Asian Study warned that if North Korea began to shell large population centres of the south, the US and South Korea might "take the opportunity to overthrow the North Korean regime". Zhang called for the Chinese army to prepare to move into North Korea, in the event of the regime's fall, to carve out a 20-30 kilometre wide buffer zone to block refugees flooding into China.

Han Xudong of the National Defence University said the worst situation would be a second exchange of shelling between two Koreas, which could trigger US and Russian involvement. "The United States would intervene with 'lightning speed' into the Korean Peninsula," he said. "Under such a situation, another regional power, Russia, would not sit idle watching the security situation in North East Asia deteriorate and letting the US take control of the peninsula."

In another US show of force, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington will lead massive US-Japan exercises starting today, just after participating in the US-South Korean exercises off China's coast in the Yellow Sea. Most of this week's exercises will be held east of Japan, but some will be near Okinawa, the southern prefecture that administers the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea, the subject of a recent conflict between Japan and China.

Involving 44,000 troops, 60 warships and 400 aircraft, the US-Japan war games from December 3 to 10, are the biggest since 1986. This month's drills will involve "island defence"—a subject that is particularly inflammatory given the flaring up of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. In this context, the US-Japan war games provide real content to Clinton's two recent announcements that Washington was obliged to militarily support Japan under the US-Japan Security Treaty if fighting broke out between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands.

Washington has reiterated that the exercises with both South Korea and Japan were planned months ago. Nevertheless, the US and Japan are proceeding with the war games at a time of high tensions on the Korean peninsula, rather than delaying or cancelling them, as part of its broader aggressive moves over the past year to undermine China's rising influence in Asia.

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