US extends permitted range of South Korean missiles

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In another provocative move that will inflame tensions in North East Asia, the Obama administration has revised a treaty with South Korea to allow that country's military to extend the range of its ballistic missiles to cover all of North Korea. The decision has been criticised by North Korea and also by China, Russia and Japan.

The treaty revision on October 7 permits South Korea to increase the range of its missiles from 300 to 800 kilometres. This represents a fundamental shift from the 1979 guidelines imposed on South Korea by the US. At the time, Seoul requested US technological aid to develop a ballistic missile, but the US, concerned about a regional arms race, limited the range to just 180 kilometres. In 2000, after repeated requests from South Korea, the US agreed to extend the range to 300 kilometres.

Under the new agreement, the payload of longer-range South Korean missiles will still be limited to 500 kilograms, but the new 800-kilometre limit will enable them to strike anywhere in North Korea, as well as parts of China, Japan and Russia.

According to South Korea's *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper, the revision also involves an increase in the payloads permitted for shorter-range missiles. "As a result, Seoul can increase the weight of a warhead on a missile with a range of 550 kilometres to one tonne, and increase that of the Hyunmun-2A missile (300-kilometre range) that were deployed to two tonnes, significantly increasing its firepower."

The Yonhap news agency reported last Monday that South Korea will deploy new ballistic missiles with a range of 550-800 kilometres within five years. Earlier this year, the military deployed a cruise missile, which is not covered by the ballistic missile guidelines, with a range of 1,500 kilometres.

Moreover, South Korea is now allowed to increase the payload of its combat drones from 500 kilograms to 2.5 tonnes. Global Hawke, a US drone, has a payload of 2.25 tonnes. The US has used combat drones extensively to carry out attacks and assassinations inside Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak had been pushing for an extension of the ballistic missile range to 1,000 kilometres since negotiations began in September 2010. But the Obama administration ruled that out in a bid to appease its other regional ally, Japan, which had reportedly objected to any extension. The Japanese capital, Tokyo, lies within 1,000 kilometres of South Korea.

In recent months, Japan has been locked in a tense dispute with South Korea over the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets. These tensions have already led to the collapse of a joint intelligence sharing agreement between Japan and South Korea, cutting across US plans to develop trilateral military ties as a strategic bulwark against China.

White House spokesman Jay Carney downplayed the missile range revision, saying it was simply "a prudent, proportional, and specific response" to North Korea's "nuclear threat". It was "absolutely legitimate" for South Korea to "take actions in consultation with the United States to respond to a threat posed by the DPRK's [North Korea] ballistic missile program," he

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added.

The North Korean national defence commission declared that it was prepared to counter any military threat by the US or its South Korean "puppet". Its strategic rocket forces could strike "not only the bases of the puppet forces and the US imperialist aggression forces' bases … but also Japan, Guam and the US mainland."

In fact, North Korea's ballistic missile technology is rudimentary at best. Its unreliability was shown in the recent North Korean missile test in April, supposedly to send a satellite into space, which failed within minutes. In reality, the US is exploiting the North Korean "rogue state" to increase the military capacity of one of its key allies, as part of a build-up that is primarily directed against China.

The US-South Korean decision to extend the missile range is likely to fuel an arms race with North Korea, which has a sizeable arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles, and has been working on long-range missiles. In 2007, the North Korean military deployed the Musudan ballistic missile, which has a theoretical range of 3,000-4,000 kilometres.

China and Russia have both expressed concerns that a US ally, South Korea, now has ballistic missiles capable of reaching their territory. Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich declared that Moscow "invariably reaffirmed our negative attitude to the leadership of the Republic of Korea [South Korea] over these intentions, which are potential sources of further exacerbation of military-political situation on the Korean Peninsula and a new round of an arms race."

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei declared that Beijing did not want to see an "escalated military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula." Without naming South Korea and the US, he called on "all parties" to avoid the proliferation of "weapons of mass destruction".

Chinese analysts have interpreted the US-backed revision of the missile pact as primarily aimed at China. "The Washington-Seoul agreement on extending the range of Seoul's ballistic missiles offers another channel for the United States to boost its military presence in Northeast Asia," the state-owned English language *China Daily* wrote.

The US-South Korean move will only encourage China to develop counter-measures. After carefully studying the US wars against Iraq in 1990-91 and from 2003, China has been developing tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones in recent years.

The Obama administration's missile agreement with South Korea is just one aspect of its aggressive diplomatic and strategic steps over the past three years to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia by strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships, and restructuring and building up its military forces in the region. This reckless policy has heightened the danger that an incident on the Korean peninsula, or in one of the region's many flashpoints, could escalate into a broader and potentially disastrous military conflict.

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