

UN sanctions prompt North Korea to threaten nuclear test

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The UN Security Council last week imposed new sanctions to penalise North Korea for its long-range rocket launch on December 12. Pyongyang reacted by threatening “all-out” actions, indicating that it could conduct a third nuclear test. In 2006 and 2009, North Korea conducted atomic tests after being sanctioned by the UN for similar rocket launches.

The Obama administration exploited the rocket launch to maintain pressure on North Korea as it proceeds with its aggressive “pivot to Asia” that is directed against Pyongyang’s main ally, China. The UN resolution was the result of negotiations between the US and China—in return for China not using its veto, the US agreed not to impose new forms of sanctions.

The UN resolution did, however, expand the existing sanctions regime. Ten new entities have been targeted, including the North Korean space agency responsible for the rocket launch, a North Korean bank, and several banking officials based in China. The resolution also updates lists of banned nuclear and ballistic missile technology.

North Korea has reacted angrily. A National Defence Commission statement declared: “In a new phase of the anti-US struggle, we do not hide that the various satellite and long-range rockets that we will continue to launch, and the high-level nuclear test that we will conduct, are targeted at the US, the sworn enemy of our people.”

While the new UN sanctions are largely symbolic, the US is using the North Korean threat of a nuclear test as a means of exerting pressure on China. Visiting South Korea and Japan last weekend, US special representative on North Korea, Glyn Davies, warned that a nuclear test would effectively end the six-party talks on North Korea that are sponsored by China. “If they go in the direction of testing a nuclear device, they

are going to set back the prospect of any diplomatic process going forward,” he said.

China’s foreign ministry spokesman, Hong Lei, called for “the relevant sides” to “remain calm and restrained and earnestly maintain the peace and stability of Northeast Asia.” At the same time, he indirectly criticised North Korea, saying that it should “develop its economy and improve people’s living conditions” rather than a nuclear program.

The isolated Stalinist regime has become heavily dependent on China for trade and economic aid since the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

An editorial in the state-owned *Global Times* warned Pyongyang: “If North Korea engages in further nuclear tests, China will not hesitate to reduce its assistance.” The newspaper pointed to Beijing’s concerns: “China has a dilemma: there’s no possible way for us to search for a diplomatic balance between North Korea and South Korea, Japan and the US... After putting a lot of effort into amendments for the draft resolution, China also voted for it. It seems that North Korea does not appreciate China’s efforts.”

The Chinese regime fears that the US will use another North Korean nuclear test to expand its military presence in Asia, especially its anti-ballistic missile systems, which are aimed primarily against Beijing, not Pyongyang. It will also enable the Obama administration to further strengthen military ties with US allies, including Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

An editorial by *Bloomberg.com* on Tuesday called for tougher action if North Korea went ahead with the test. “The Obama administration should push the Chinese for a coordinated response,” it declared. “If the Chinese baulk, the US will be justified in cooperating more closely with Japan and South Korea on missile defence,

maritime patrols, counter-proliferation initiatives and other strategic efforts that China won't like."

Washington would also push for closer trilateral strategic ties between US, South Korea and Japan. An initial attempt collapsed last year after South Korean President Lee Myung-bak at the last minute postponed the signing of a military intelligence sharing agreement with Tokyo. One of the key obstacles has been the ongoing territorial dispute between Japan and South Korea over the Dokdo/ Takeshima islands.

Lee, who ended the previous "Sunshine Policy" of opening up North Korea, held an emergency meeting on Thursday, which warned of "various serious consequences" if North Korea carried out the nuclear test. President-elect Park Geun-hye, who will be inaugurated later this month, indicated that she would still seek to improve relations with North Korea, but warned that a further nuclear test "will not be tolerated."

The duplicity of Washington's stance was highlighted by South Korea's successful launch of its first space rocket this week. This brought no condemnation by the US and its allies. South Korean officials have made no secret of the implications of the launch for the development of long-range ballistic missiles. Last year the US signed a deal with South Korea allowing it to double its existing missile range, to 800 kilometres, enabling it to hit any target in North Korea as well as parts of China.

Speaking to a delegation sent to Beijing by South Korean president-elect Park, Chinese leader Xi Jinping reportedly declared that North Korea's nuclear programs were "intolerable." His concern was that tensions on the Korean Peninsula were a major obstacle to better relations with Seoul, including a potential free trade agreement, and could drive South Korea to align more closely with the US.

China also fears that the new right-wing government in Japan could exploit a North Korean nuclear test to bolster its military capacity. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has already announced an increased military budget and plans to modify the country's so-called pacifist constitution. Last Sunday, Japan launched two intelligence satellites with radar and optical sensors to monitor North Korea's nuclear and missile activities. These assets could also be used against China.

Abe warned on a TV show that Japan would

introduce "quite severe measures" against North Korea if it conducted the nuclear test. Japan already bans port calls by North Korean ships and all trade with North Korea. The Japanese government is reportedly considering stepping up restrictions on money transfers from Japan to North Korea and revoking re-entry permits to Korean residents who travel to North Korea.

The Korean peninsula is just one of the flashpoints that have been inflamed by the Obama administration's reckless "pivot" to Asia, greatly heightening regional tensions and the danger of open conflict.



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