

US intensifies pressure on China over North Korea

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Amid continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, China has criticised the US for announcing a large increase in its anti-ballistic missile interceptors based in the Asia Pacific region. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei warned on Monday that “strengthening anti-missile [systems] will intensify antagonism”. He called on the “relevant country... to adopt a responsible attitude and act prudently.”

Last Friday, US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel announced that the number of interceptors in Alaska would expand by 14, on top of 30 already in place in Alaska and California. While Hagel claimed that the US was responding to North Korea’s “irresponsible and reckless provocations”, the plans to boost anti-missile systems in Asia had been in the pipeline for months. Hagel also announced the establishment of a second radar station in Japan to track ballistic missiles.

Both China and Russia have opposed the US build-up of anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia and Europe, which are not primarily aimed at so-called “rogue states” such as Iran and North Korea, but at undermining Chinese and Russian nuclear arsenals. Far from being “defensive”, the ability to track and destroy ballistic missiles enhances the US capacity to conduct a “first strike” without the danger of retaliation.

Hagel’s announcement focuses on China, while opening the door for renewed talks with Russia. The increase in interceptor numbers in Asia involves shifting resources from Europe, effectively putting the final phase of a European-based anti-missile system on hold. Moscow has strenuously opposed the deployment of such military technology in Europe.

The Obama administration is exploiting North Korea’s third nuclear test last month to put pressure on Beijing in other ways. US Deputy Defence Secretary Ashton Carter met with senior South Korean officials

in Seoul on Monday. He noted that relations with the new administration of right wing South Korean President Park Geun-hye had got “off to a very productive start”.

As part of Obama’s so-called “pivot to Asia”, Washington has been strengthening US military ties and alliances throughout the region to contain China. Carter assured South Korea that US spending reductions would not affect its military commitment to Asia, and that its “historic priority” of rebalancing to Asia would be accomplished “no matter what happens”.

Carter also pointedly noted that a nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bomber would make a flight over South Korea on Tuesday as part of the joint US-South Korean war games currently underway. Pentagon press secretary George Little commented: “We are drawing attention to the fact that we have extended deterrence capabilities that we believe are important to demonstrate in the wake of recent North Korean rhetoric.”

US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew also raised the issue of North Korea during his visit to Beijing that ended yesterday. He pressed Chinese leaders to use their economic leverage, as Pyongyang’s main source of trade and aid, to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Lew called for closer scrutiny of North Korean banks under US sanction, hinting that Washington could consider penalties against Chinese banks if its demands were not met.

Earlier this month, China voted for a new round of sanctions on North Korea in the UN Security Council. According to South Korea’s Yonhap news agency on Tuesday, Chinese authorities have issued a warning to four North Korean financial institutions to conduct business in China strictly according to their permits or

face penalties. But US Treasury undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence David Cohen, who was due to arrive in Beijing yesterday, is likely to push for tougher measures.

Chinese leaders are well aware that the US is using North Korea's nuclear and rocket tests as the pretext not only for expanding anti-ballistic missile systems in the Asia Pacific, but for maintaining US military forces in Japan and South Korea and restructuring its strategic position throughout the region. But Beijing is equally concerned that pressure on the fragile regime in Pyongyang could lead to its collapse, resulting in the loss of a longstanding ally as well as likely triggering a flood of refugees into northern China.

Confronting relentless US pressure over North Korea, a debate has opened up in Chinese ruling circles as to whether to simply cut Pyongyang loose. A prominent comment published in the British-based *Financial Times* last month, "China should abandon North Korea", by Deng Yuwen, a top official at the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) cadre school, signalled that a discussion was underway.

At this month's National People's Congress, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who has since been appointed as state councillor in charge of foreign affairs, insisted that Chinese support for UN sanctions did not indicate a change of approach to North Korea. He renewed China's call for dialogue through the stalled six-party talks involving the two Korea, China, the US, Russia and Japan.

The *New York Times*, however, reported that an intense debate took place in a side session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee, a government advisory body. "Delegates to the conference, according to a senior Communist Party official, Qiu Yuanping, talked about whether to 'keep or dump' North Korea and debated whether China, as a major power, should 'fight or talk' with the North," the *Times* wrote.

Like Deng's article in the *Financial Times*, Qui's public comments are unusually open. They constitute a warning to the North Korean regime that it cannot necessarily count on China's continued support. Qui, who is deputy director of the CCP's Central Foreign Affairs Office, made the remarks in the presence of journalists at session titled "Friendship with Foreign Countries", attended by several Chinese ambassadors.

Financial Times article, In Deng Yuwen's conclusion, "China should consider abandoning North Korea. The best way of giving up on Pyongyang is to take the initiative to facilitate North Korea's unification with South Korea." Such a step, he wrote, would assist China in a number of ways, including to "undermine the strategic alliance between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul."

Such a project confronts huge political and economic obstacles. But the fact that it is even being contemplated, let alone aired in the premier mouthpiece of British finance capital, points to growing desperation in Beijing and underscores the acute geopolitical tensions being generated in North East Asia by Obama's aggressive "pivot".



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