

US sends fighter-bombers to Korea amid rising risk of war

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American F-22 stealth warplanes arrived in South Korea yesterday, placing East Asia on hair-trigger alert as Washington escalated its confrontation with North Korea, ostensibly over the country's nuclear program.

Normally stationed at Kadena Air Force Base in Japan, the jets are being deployed to Osan Air Base in South Korea, amid ongoing Foal Eagle US-South Korean military exercises.

The F-22 deployment came after two weeks of intensifying military tensions and demonstrations of US firepower against North Korea. On March 19, the US sent nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to South Korea, and last week the US sent two B-2 stealth bombers to practice dropping dummy bombs on a South Korean bombing range.

The deployment of US heavy bombers was a blunt threat that, in the event of military conflict in East Asia, Washington is prepared to use nuclear weapons. This threat is directed not only at North Korea, but also at China, the main target of US operations in the region, which provides essential supplies of food and fuel to the North Korean regime in Pyongyang.

As for North Korea, a small and poor country of 25 million people, the B-2 flights were a signal that Washington is prepared to annihilate the country. B-2 bombers carry 16 B83 nuclear bombs, each with a yield of 1.2 megatons—75 times the power of the atomic bombs the United States dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. If two B-2 bombers dropped their payloads on North Korea, they would destroy all its large and mid-sized cities.

On Saturday, US military officials told the Wall Street Journal that they were pledged to prepare a series of further demonstrations of force against Pyongyang. They declined to say what these demonstrations would be, citing “operational security concerns.”

The Pentagon has also announced the preparation of a joint “counter-provocation plan” together with South Korea against Pyongyang. This is aimed at ensuring a more aggressive response to any North Korean military action, as in 2010, when North Korea launched artillery bombardments after being accused of sinking the South Korean frigate Cheonan. The current US-South Korean plan poses the risk of a rapid escalation of fighting, were such a clash to occur again.

This risk is heightened by the politics of South Korea's newly elected conservative president, Park Geun-hye, the daughter of South Korean military dictator Park Chung-hee. With her government collapsing in the polls, she has proposed expanding South Korea's nuclear program. Were any border fighting to break out, she would be under intense pressure to escalate the clash to prove the toughness of her anti-North Korean position.

In a recent editorial titled “Only Fierce Response Can Deter North Korean Provocations,” South Korea's conservative Chosun Ilbo denounced the “muddled, ineffectual response” to the 2010 clash. The newspaper also described the “counter-provocation plan,” which involves large-scale fighting led by the United States, with Japanese assistance.

Chosun Ilbo wrote: “The South Korean military will handle the initial response while the US Seventh Fleet, including the aircraft carrier George Washington, will be mobilized along with Japanese F-22 fighter jets, followed by the deployment of US Marines to handle joint missions.”

The tensions provoked by the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia,” aimed at assembling a coalition of US-allied states to contain China, have now exploded into a full-fledged war crisis.

On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

warned that “we may simply let the situation slip out of our control and it will slide into a spiral of a vicious circle.”

The Western media’s denunciations of North Korea notwithstanding, US imperialism bears central responsibility. Over the last year, Washington has announced plans to build an antiballistic missile shield, aimed at China though justified as a measure against North Korea. It has also encouraged a naval confrontation between Japan and China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands.

Washington has used North Korea as a means to pressure the regime in Beijing, which has emerged as a major obstacle to US war drives against Syria and Iran, and which is the United States’ largest foreign creditor, to align itself more directly with US foreign policy.

Yesterday, China’s state-run Xinhua news agency published a column titled “Cooler Minds Must Prevail on Korean Peninsula.” It stated: “China, as a strategic stakeholder in the region, has long called for calm on the Korean Peninsula. Now both the DPRK [the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, i.e., North Korea] and the United States should tone down their rhetoric and work with Beijing for an early return to the long-stalled six-party talks.”

While pressing for a return to negotiations, Beijing is also signaling Pyongyang that China may cease to support it against Washington. Earlier this month it voted at the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Pyongyang over its nuclear program. According to dispatches published by WikiLeaks, sections of the Chinese regime view Pyongyang as a troublesome “spoiled child.”

Over the weekend, Pyongyang issued a statement declaring that a “state of war” exists on the Korean peninsula. The statement followed a mass military rally in Pyongyang on Friday.

Beyond Pyongyang’s bellicose rhetoric, however, available reports indicate a peculiar state of calm inside North Korea. US military officials have said that their intelligence on the North Korean military indicates no unusual activity. As for the situation in Pyongyang, AP journalists reported that beyond the military parade, “elsewhere it was business as usual at restaurants, shops, farms, and factories, where the workers have heard it all before.”

As for Pyongyang’s statement regarding a “state of

war” in Korea, this is a legal truth: the armistice that ended fighting in the 1950-1953 Korean War never technically ended the state of war in Korea. Pyongyang has long called for a formal peace treaty, which was opposed in 1953 by the United States and particularly by its fascistic South Korean puppet regime, led by Syngman Rhee. Since then, Washington has rebuffed North Korean requests for a peace treaty.

Pyongyang’s statements suggest that sections of the North Korean bureaucracy are attempting to reach some type of accommodation with Washington.

The Central Committee of the North Korea’s ruling Workers Party met yesterday, after having cryptically announced that it would settle an “important issue,” and released a statement before today’s one-day session of the North Korean parliament. While pledging to continue with its nuclear program, the statement said Pyongyang would “make positive efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation.”

The statement signaled Pyongyang’s readiness to open up North Korea as an export economy dependent on foreign capital to exploit North Korean workers’ cheap labor. It called for a shift to a “knowledge-based economy,” for foreign trade to be made “multilateral and diversified,” and for investment to be “widely introduced.” Pyongyang already operates several export zones, notably with South Korea at Kaesong.

Pyongyang’s attempts to settle differences with Washington and integrate itself into the world capitalist economy have repeatedly foundered on US opposition, however. It is unclear what assurances Washington could give leaders in Pyongyang of their own safety after opening up their economy to US and foreign capital—particularly amid rapidly escalating tensions between the United States and Pyongyang’s main regional ally, China.

North Korea was designated a member of the “Axis of Evil” by the Bush administration in 2001 and remains a target of constant vilification in the Western press.



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