

US escalates military tensions over North Korean nuclear program

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Washington is continuing to escalate military tensions in the global crisis triggered by the US confrontation with North Korea over its nuclear program. All of the region's major powers are carrying out military exercises amid rising fears of a war fueled by the US "pivot to Asia," aimed at containing China, North Korea's main ally and protector.

Yesterday, US officials deployed more forces to the Asia-Pacific and held high-level talks with Asian allies in Washington, while North Korea pledged to restart the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. As part of the two-month-long US-South Korean "Eagle Foal" military exercises, the US deployed a second guided missile destroyer, the USS *John McCain*, to Korean waters.

President Barack Obama met with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the White House. At a press conference following the meeting, the two leaders promoted US-Singaporean military and economic cooperation and announced the deployment of more US warships to Singapore, a port located on waterways connecting the Indian and Pacific Ocean that are critical to Chinese trade. Neither Obama nor Lee raised the military stand-off in Korea.

US Secretary of State John Kerry met with South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se. Yun said their meeting focused on the Korean peninsula, the US-South Korea alliance, and a coming state visit in May by South Korean President Park Geun-hye. Adding that South Korea supported US policy in Asia, Yun said China was being "cooperative" on North Korea.

For his part, Kerry said the US "will not accept North Korea as a nuclear state." This formulation, applied to Iran, has been used to signal US willingness to go to war to keep Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. On Monday, South Korea announced arrangements that give US operational control of South Korean forces in

wartime and reportedly authorize possible "pre-emptive strikes" against Pyongyang.

At his press briefing yesterday, White House spokesman Jay Carney called for China and Russia to pressure Pyongyang to fall in line with US demands. "We are in close contact with our allies in Seoul and Tokyo," he said. "We are regularly reaching out to Beijing and Moscow to encourage them to do more to restrain the North Koreans."

North Korea is restarting a reactor it shuttered in 2007, detonating the plant's cooling tower. Its bid to normalize relations with the US in exchange for ending its nuclear program failed after the Bush administration refused to accept its nuclear verification protocols.

The side that is escalating tensions without restraint is not Pyongyang, but Washington. It will take several months to restart the reactor, which Pyongyang said would be used for civilian energy purposes, and at least a year to produce enough material for a nuclear bomb, should Pyongyang use the reactor for that purpose.

The latest US deployments, on the other hand, follow on the heels of the Pentagon's decision to fly nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers and B-52 bombers to Korea. Washington claimed this was to signal its nuclear deterrence capabilities and prove to its allies in South Korea and Japan the obvious fact that the US militarily outclasses tiny North Korea. In reality, it was a blunt threat to the Chinese regime that the US is willing to use nuclear weapons.

China and Russia also held large-scale military exercises over the weekend. The Chinese navy held live-fire exercises in the South China Sea, and Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered snap naval exercises by Russia's Black Sea fleet after returning from a summit of emerging powers, including China, held in South Africa.

Washington is using the North Korean nuclear standoff to pressure China, which has emerged as the most powerful block on US imperialist policy. Not only is China the United States' largest creditor, it has vetoed UN resolutions that would have sanctioned open and direct military intervention by Washington against Syria. China, moreover, continues to trade with Iran.

These points of conflict underscore the powerful imperialist interests driving Washington to adopt an increasingly provocative posture toward Beijing with the aim, in the short-term, of shifting China's foreign policies.

On North Korea, Beijing has distanced itself from Pyongyang's decision to restart the Yongbyon reactor. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said, "We have noticed the statement made by the DPRK [i.e., North Korea] and feel regretful about it. We are calling for all parties concerned to remain calm and restrained, return to dialogue and consultation as soon as possible, and jointly seek ways to appropriately resolve the issue."

In an April 1 article, China's *Global Times* called for Beijing to limit its support for North Korea and work out a joint policy with Washington. The article stated: "China and the US have shared common interests on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and maintaining stability there. China's policy toward North Korea should shift over time."

The article also warned Pyongyang against believing that China has "tolerance toward North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons or constant nuclear tests."

Such comments reflect the political crisis shaking Beijing, as Washington demands that it turn upon a country to which it has deep political and geo-strategic ties.

In 1950, the year after a revolution brought the Chinese Communist Party to power, the Chinese army intervened in the Korean War against the United States to prevent the destruction of North Korea by US and South Korean forces. It thus blocked the establishment of a pro-US state directly on China's border and a possible US invasion of China to restore capitalist rule. The war cost nearly one million Chinese soldiers' lives. The Chinese army maintains close ties to its North Korean counterpart to this day.

Unlike the Chinese and Vietnamese bureaucracies, however, which turned to exploiting the working class

as cheap labor for export industries based on Western capital during the 1980s, Pyongyang has remained economically isolated. Washington has consistently opposed attempts to normalize relations with Pyongyang—a decision fraught with complex consequences in the explosive geo-political environment of the Korean peninsula.

Nonetheless, the Pyongyang regime is as reactionary as its counterparts in Beijing and Hanoi. As the global economic crisis drives regimes throughout Asia to prepare new assaults on working class wages and social conditions, sections of the North Korean regime are signaling their intention to press ahead with further market measures. Monday's nomination of market reformer Pak Pong-ju as North Korea's prime minister is one such signal of attempts by the bureaucracy to find a basis for better relations with US imperialism.

At the same time, the Pyongyang regime remains deeply divided internally and fearful of the consequences of normalizing ties with the US, especially under conditions where Washington is constantly threatening it with war.

In January, Germany's conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote that North Korean officials were secretly consulting German economists and lawyers on how to restore ties to the world capitalist economy. One of the experts told the newspaper that Pyongyang was interested in the market model in Vietnam, "where selected enterprises are chosen to carry out investment."

Another said that the army, which currently dominates North Korea's economy, largely opposed such plans. "The military in North Korea will not want to give up control, however, so it is not at all clear that the reforms will succeed," he stated.

Under these conditions, US imperialism appears set to further escalate its military threats in an attempt to whip Pyongyang and Beijing into line.



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