

Obama's dangerous "counter-provocation" plan against North Korea

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9 April 2013

The aggressive character of the Obama administration's actions on the Korean Peninsula was further underlined by leaked details in the *New York Times* on Sunday of a "counter-provocation" plan against North Korea, drawn up by the US and South Korean militaries. Amid sharply rising tensions, Washington is not simply responding to North Korean threats, but is engaged in reckless provocations of its own that risk the outbreak of war.

Citing unnamed US officials, the *Times* explained that the plan called "for an immediate but proportional 'response in kind'—hitting the source of any North Korean attack with similar weapons. For example, if the North Koreans were to shell a South Korean island that had military installations... the plan calls for the South to retaliate quickly with a barrage of artillery of similar intensity."

In 2010, artillery exchanges between the two Koreas, involving the South Korean island of Yeonpyong, resulted in the deaths of two South Korean marines and two civilians. The incident, which followed warnings from North Korea against provocative South Korean naval exercises close to disputed waters, quickly heightened tensions and the danger of war.

Now, according to the *Times*, the US and South Korea have "drawn up plans to respond more forcefully than in the recent past, but in a limited way intended to prevent an escalation into broader war." Gary Samore, until recently Obama's top nuclear adviser, told the newspaper: "How we carry out a proportional retaliation without triggering a general conflict, or an assault on Seoul, is the hardest part of the problem. Everyone is aware there are not big margins for error here."

US actions over the past three weeks have been anything but "proportionate" and measured. Pyongyang

responded to a new round of US-led economic sanctions over its third nuclear test last month, and joint US-South Korean military exercises, by cutting off military "hotlines" and issuing a series of threats. As part of its "counter-provocation" plan, the US flew nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 strategic bombers to South Korea to demonstrate its ability to obliterate North Korea's military and industrial capacity.

While North Korea's rhetoric has, as in the past, been bellicose, its threats to attack the US mainland or US bases on Guam and Hawaii are largely empty. Moreover, there are no signs that North Korea is mobilising its army, or the population, for war. While Western television coverage routinely includes archived footage of North Korean military parades and live-fire exercises, there is no evidence of war preparations in Pyongyang.

The Obama administration's confrontational stance toward North Korea is part of a far broader strategic shift—the "pivot to Asia"—that is aimed at containing China militarily and undermining its economic and political influence throughout the region. In doing so, the US has encouraged allies such as Japan and South Korea to take a more aggressive stance.

One senior administration official told the *Times*: "Overreaction by South Korea is a real risk—and we are working on the problem." Newly-installed President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee, has already told the armed forces they have a free hand to act against North Korea in the event of any attack. Having deliberately stoked the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the US has heightened the risk of provocations or acts of war by the South Korean military.

The South Korean government yesterday compounded the tensions by suggesting that North

Korea was preparing a fourth nuclear test. Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-jae was later forced to retract his claim, implausibly declaring that he could not remember making the comments. Clearly he had been pulled into line. A ministry spokesman said there were no signs of unusual activity at North Korea's underground test site.

Pyongyang took a further step yesterday in cutting ties with Seoul by shutting down the Kaesong Industrial Zone used by South Korean companies to exploit cheap North Korean labour. North Korea had previously blocked South Korean managers and supplies from entering the zone, but it has now sent the 50,000 workers home and suggested that the closure might be permanent. The industrial zone is one of North Korea's few sources of foreign exchange. By shutting it down, Pyongyang is signalling its determination not to be bullied economically by South Korea or by US sanctions.

Washington's escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula is not aimed primarily at North Korea, but at China. The Obama administration has exploited North Korean threats to justify a further military build-up in Asia, especially of anti-ballistic missile systems that could be used not only against North Korea, but also China. Beijing has previously protested against the American deployment of such weapons.

The *Times* spelt out Washington's calculations quite explicitly: "The additional American military presence is believed to be highly worrisome to Beijing, and is intended to be. It is an effort to demonstrate to the Chinese that unless they get their ward [North Korea] under control, they will invite exactly the kind of American military presence that they are hoping will go away."

The Obama administration is certainly using the crisis on the Korean Peninsula to pressure Beijing into taking action against North Korea. But the US has a far broader agenda, aimed at testing out the new Chinese leadership with a view to extracting concessions on a range of economic and strategic issues.

At the same time, Washington has no intention of stopping its military preparations for future conflict and war with China. A US official told the *Times*: "There are some who question our long-term staying power in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in a time of spending restraints. So it is important to show our allies that we

can still project power in a very meaningful and rapid way."

There are some signs that the US may be seeking to wind back tensions on the Korean Peninsula, temporarily at least. On Sunday, the Pentagon announced that the US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel had postponed tests of an intercontinental ballistic missile, fearing it could "exacerbate the crisis with North Korea." However, having inflamed the situation, the US has also created conditions in which a minor incident or miscalculation could quickly escalate into military confrontation.



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