

Obama issues new threat to North Korea

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Amid continuing high tensions on the Korean Peninsula, American President Barack Obama yesterday issued another threat to North Korea. He warned that the US would take “all necessary measures” to protect its people and allies, if Pyongyang did not “end the kind of belligerent approach that they’ve been taking and to try to lower temperatures.”

Obama made the comments after meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The US president declared: “Nobody wants to see conflict on the Korean Peninsula. But it’s important for North Korea, like every other country in the world, to observe the basic rules and norms that are set forth, including a wide variety of UN resolutions.”

Far from attempting to lower temperatures on the Korean Peninsula, the Obama administration has been deliberately stoking the crisis. Over the past month, the Pentagon has flown nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 strategic bombers to South Korea to send a message to Pyongyang, and its ally Beijing, that the US is capable of destroying North Korea’s military and industrial infrastructure.

The North Korean regime has in turn played directly into Washington’s hands with its own belligerent rhetoric and empty threats. The US and its allies, in order to justify a continuing military build-up, particularly of anti-missile systems, have seized on signs that the North Korean military is preparing to launch one or more of its intermediate range missiles. This week the Japanese military stationed Patriot anti-missile batteries at the Defence Ministry and military installations in and around Tokyo.

The Pentagon added to the climate of fear yesterday by saying the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) had concluded that North Korea had a nuclear weapon that could be mounted on a missile. The agency declared: “DIA assesses with moderate confidence the North has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic

missiles. However, the reliability will be low.” No reasons were given for this dubious assessment and the rest of the report is classified.

Since 2006, North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests, the most recent in February. During the past month, Pyongyang has threatened to attack the US, making a highly questionable claim to have developed miniaturised nuclear bombs. All three nuclear tests were of low yield—far less than the atomic bomb that the US dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945—suggesting they were rather crude devices.

Pentagon spokesman George Little backed away from the DIA conclusion, saying: “It would be inaccurate to suggest that the North Korean regime has fully tested, developed or demonstrated the kinds of nuclear capabilities referenced in the passage.” But the suggestion has been made, and picked up by the American media, further fuelling public anxiety and creating an atmosphere in which the Obama administration could take pre-emptive military actions against North Korea.

Obama’s comments followed similar threats on Wednesday by US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel. He warned North Korea that it was “skating very close to a dangerous line” and called for Pyongyang to “ratchet down” its rhetoric. If it did not do so, he added, “we have every capacity to deal with any action North Korea will take ... [in order] to protect this country and our allies.”

The Obama administration is taking a far tougher stance toward Pyongyang than in the previous crisis that erupted in 2010 after artillery exchanges between North and South Korea involving Yeonpyong Island. Washington has made clear that it will not make the slightest concession to Pyongyang—a small, isolated, impoverished state—that could ease the crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

As part of his aggressive “pivot to Asia” against

China, Obama has exploited the Korean crisis to apply pressure not only to Pyongyang but also to Beijing. Using the pretext of a North Korean missile threat, the US has announced the boosting of anti-ballistic missile systems in Alaska and Guam that would primarily be of use in a nuclear war with China.

Earlier this week, US Deputy Defence Secretary Ashton Carter dismissed Chinese objections to the anti-missile build-up, declaring: “If North Korea is causing the US and others to take actions which they [the Chinese] find to be the sort of thing that they do not like to see, there is an easy way to address that.”

While Carter did not spell it out, the US is pressing Beijing to act against Pyongyang, which depends heavily on China for aid and imports, especially of oil. The Korean crisis has exacerbated the dilemma confronting the Chinese leadership. It has long regarded its North Korean ally as a vital buffer on its northern border. At the same time, the ongoing tensions have led to a US military build-up and raise the danger that South Korea or Japan could develop their own nuclear weapons.

Two editorials in China’s state-run *Global Times* this week highlight the problems facing Beijing. The first on Tuesday, entitled “North Korea cannot justify its overreaction,” was a warning to Pyongyang that China’s patience was wearing thin. “As the North keeps creating tensions in Northeast Asia which goes against the two [China and Russia], the favourable opinion of the Chinese public toward Pyongyang is fading. This does no good to the North’s long-term interests.”

But an editorial today, entitled “Geopolitics makes abandoning NK naïve,” declared that China was not about to buckle to US pressure. “China is bound to adjust to North Korean policies, but it doesn’t mean it will side with the US, Japan and South Korea. Rather, it will respond to the North’s extreme moves, which offend China’s interests and will make the North correct its moves,” the newspaper stated.

Today’s editorial was aimed at US Secretary of State John Kerry who arrives today for talks in South Korea before heading to China and Japan. North Korea will be top of the agenda in all three countries. In Beijing, Kerry will use the Korean crisis to press China to do more to force North Korea to meet US demands, and to extract other concessions from the new Chinese

leadership.



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