

US Secretary of State blackmails China over North Korea

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In meetings with Chinese leaders last weekend, US Secretary of State John Kerry engaged in a barely disguised form of blackmail to pressure Beijing to use “all options” to force its ally North Korea to dismantle its nuclear programs and destroy its nuclear weapons. Impoverished North Korea is completely dependent on China for vital imports, including oil and economic aid.

In recent weeks, Washington has aggressively ratcheted up tensions on the Korean Peninsula following North Korea’s third nuclear test in February. As well as flying nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 strategic bombers to South Korea, the US has bolstered anti-missile ballistic systems in Alaska and Guam, and moved two Aegis-class destroyers, equipped with anti-missile defences, closer to Korean waters.

Beijing has in the past protested against the build-up of US anti-ballistic missile systems in the Asia-Pacific region, knowing that China is the primary target. Speaking in Seoul before arriving in Beijing, Kerry made clear that the US would continue to deploy such weapons, unless Beijing “put some teeth” into forcing North Korea to denuclearise.

After meeting with Chinese leaders, Kerry said the discussion had included “why we have taken the steps that we have taken” in missile defence. “Now obviously if the threat disappears—i.e. North Korea denuclearises—the same imperative does not exist at that point of time for us to have that kind of robust forward leaning posture of defence,” he said.

While the US has no intention of dismantling its anti-missile systems in the region, Kerry’s arm-twisting appears to have produced some results. For Beijing, the latest Korean crisis has intensified its dilemma over Pyongyang. If China is unable to rein in its ally, the US, as well as Japan and South Korea, will exploit the situation to justify an ongoing military expansion.

However, if Beijing enforces an economic blockade of North Korea, it could lead to acute political and social turmoil on China’s northern borders.

Kerry provided no details of his meetings with Chinese leaders, but did tell reporters: “I can assure you that we left no option off the table and we had a full discussion about what the possibilities might be.” The reference to “all options” implies that military, as well as economic threats, were discussed.

The sinister implications of Kerry’s comments were underlined by his announcement that further talks with Chinese officials would take place, involving US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Martin Dempsey and US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns.

Beijing’s willingness to accommodate the Obama administration was underlined by the venue. Symbolically, Kerry’s meeting with China’s top official in charge of foreign affairs, State Councillor Yang Jiechi, took place in Beijing’s Diaoyutai State Guest House, the site of US President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, when the two countries sealed a bloc against the former Soviet Union.

Yang said both the US and China supported the goal of denuclearising the Korean peninsula. He also called for a return to the six-party talks, involving US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, that collapsed in 2008 after the Bush administration provocatively sought to alter a deal reached on North Korea’s nuclear programs. The Obama administration has never sought to restart the talks.

No doubt, sharp divisions still exist within the Chinese leadership over how to respond to Washington’s increasing diplomatic and strategic pressure, which is not limited to North Korea, and extends over a range of economic and geo-strategic issues.

After meeting President Xi Jinping, Kerry declared at their joint press conference that he had called for China to cooperate with the US on “some very challenging issues”. These included “issues on the Korean peninsula”, Iran’s nuclear program, Syria and the Middle East at large, as well as the worsening global economic crisis. Kerry did not elaborate on the Chinese leader’s response, except to describe the discussion as “forward-looking”.

Xi made no mention of North Korea in his remarks, insisting that relations between the US and China were at “a new historical stage and got off to a good start”. He declared that both countries should resolve their differences based on “respecting each other’s core interests”.

The official Xinhua news agency was more forceful, criticising the US for “fanning the flames” on the Korean peninsula. “It keeps sending more fighters, bombers and missile defence ships to the waters of East Asia and carrying out massive military drills with Asian allies in a dramatic display of pre-emptive power,” it warned.

The Chinese defence ministry has denied reports of “large-scale troop movements” near the Chinese-North Korea border. But the state media reported last week that live-fire exercises by Chinese forces in the region, involving tanks and armoured vehicles, as well as civilian air raid drills, had taken place. This indicates that China is clearly worried about a possible outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula.

During the last stop of his Asian tour, Kerry made clear in Tokyo that the US would keep the pressure on China. He insisted that the additional missile defence capacity ordered by Obama recently would continue until “the peninsula de-nuclearised”.

At the heart of the US “pivot” is the strengthening of military alliances and strategic partnerships throughout Asia, especially with Japan, South Korea, Australia and India. In Tokyo, Kerry reassured the Japanese government that the US-Japan military alliance had “never really been stronger than it is today” and that Washington was “committed to the defence of Japan”.

Strong US backing has only encouraged its allies to take a tougher stance against China across the region. Before the latest Korean crisis, the final months of 2012 were dominated by a dangerous standoff between Japan and China over disputed islands in the East China

Sea. In April 2012, a confrontation flared up between the Philippines and China over the contested Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

Both Japan and the Philippines have bought into the Korean crisis. In remarks directed at China, the right-wing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday called on the international community “to make North Korea understand that the situation will become progressively severe.” The Philippine foreign and defence ministers provocatively declared that if war broke out on the Korean Peninsula, the US would be allowed to use Philippine bases.

While the Obama administration is exploiting the Korean crisis to extract concessions from China, it is also leaving the door open to a US accommodation with North Korea—if it falls into line with US demands. Kerry declared in Tokyo that he would be willing to consider direct talks with North Korea at the appropriate moment, but added: “There are standards we need to reach to get to negotiations.”



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