

US leaves door ajar for talks with North Korea

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In the wake of US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to China last weekend, the Obama administration has played down the "threat" posed by North Korea. Washington's intention all along had been to manipulate the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, despite the danger of precipitating a conflict, to extract concessions from Beijing.

After meeting with Chinese leaders, Kerry told the media that "all options" in getting North Korea to denuclearise had been discussed. Top American military and diplomatic officials—Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Martin Dempsey and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns—are to hold further talks with their Chinese counterparts.

In an interview broadcast on Tuesday with NBC News, Obama confirmed that North Korea was unlikely to have a nuclear weapon that could be mounted on a missile. "Based on our current intelligence assessments, we do not think that they have that capacity," he said. His comments effectively put a lid on weeks of sensational media coverage of the supposed North Korean threat to the US.

Obama justified his build-up of anti-missile systems in the Asia Pacific, on the pretext of "dealing with every contingency". In fact, the US decision to boost its anti-ballistic missile systems in Alaska by 50 percent was taken months ago and will take several years to implement. The deployment of these weapons is not directed against North Korea, but is part of the Pentagon's plans for fighting a nuclear war against China.

During his trip, Kerry hinted that the US was open to talks with North Korea as long as Pyongyang took tangible steps to indicate its eventual willingness to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Obama also indicated that, while North Korea might take "more

provocative moves over the next several weeks", he hoped to "move into a different phase" to "work through diplomatically some of these issues".

At the same time, referring to North Korea's empty threats, Obama declared that he was not going to "reward this kind of provocative behaviour". The remark is completely hypocritical. The US exploited Pyongyang's bluster and deliberately fuelled it as a means of putting pressure on China. The Pentagon flew nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 strategic bombers, as well as F-22 fighters, to South Korea to underline its ability to devastate North Korea.

North Korea's response to offers of talks by the US and South Korea has been laden with strident language and demands, but it has not ruled out negotiations. In a statement on Wednesday, Pyongyang declared it was open for talks, but not while the US was "brandishing a nuclear stick". However, the same statement ruled out discussions with South Korea and warned of "military countermeasures" if joint US-South Korean military exercises, scheduled to run until the end of April, continued.

Yesterday, Pyongyang set out its own preconditions for talks: the lifting of UN sanctions, an end to US-South Korean military drills, the withdrawal of "all [US] nuclear war means" from South Korea, and a halt to South Korean accusations of North Korean cyber-attacks. While Kerry branded these prerequisites as "not acceptable", he said he was prepared to look at them as "at least a beginning gambit".

Kerry said the Obama administration wanted to break the cycle of past negotiations. He complained that previously "you reach agreement, they go back on it. You reach agreement again, you give them some food aid; there's some sort of bait; nothing happens."

In reality, it is the US that has held the whip hand in

negotiations with the small, economically-backward state over the past two decades. Apart from providing limited short-term aid, Washington has repeatedly reneged on agreements. Most recently, the Bush administration effectively sabotaged a deal reached in 2007 at six-party talks sponsored by China. North Korea complied with the terms—shutting down its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and beginning the process of disabling them—but in 2008 the Bush administration insisted on additional inspection conditions that were not part of the deal and led to its collapse.

The Obama administration has never attempted to revive the 2007 agreement or restart the six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia. Nor is it likely that Washington will rejoin the six-party forum, because it is managed by China. Obama's ratcheting up of tensions on the Korean Peninsula is part of his aggressive "pivot" aimed at undermining Chinese interests throughout the region. Any talks will seek to lure North Korea away from its longstanding ties with China—as has happened in the US rapprochement with Burma since 2011.

North Korea is obviously not the same as Burma, but it is similarly desperate to end the debilitating US economic and diplomatic blockade of the country, maintained since the end of the Korean War in 1953. No one should be fooled by Pyongyang's "anti-imperialist" rhetoric. The North Korean regime is more than willing to transform the country into a cheap labour platform for global corporations. It has already established an industrial zone for South Korean companies. All it seeks, in return, are guarantees for its own survival, which the US has been unwilling to give.

North Korea's new leader, Kim Jong-un, has made symbolic gestures hinting that Pyongyang could be open for business. In January, North Korea hosted an "unofficial" American delegation that included Google chairman Eric Schmidt and former US ambassador to the UN, Bill Richardson. Last month, Kim Jong-un met with former American basketball star Dennis Rodman, who has since declared that he plans to vacation with the North Korean leader in August. Pyongyang has also held off, for the time being, on a further missile test.

These diplomatic signals on both sides are extremely tentative. Moreover, having recklessly wound up tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the US has created

an unstable situation. The right-wing governments in South Korea and Japan have seized on the crisis to advance their own militarist agendas. In the Chinese leadership, there is a debate over whether or not to continue to support the North Korean regime. Any miscalculation by any party could rapidly lead to the intensification of the present standoff and a drift into conflict.



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