

New South Korean president commits to Obama's "pivot to Asia"

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye's first trip abroad since coming to office in February, which consisted of a visit to Washington, has underscored a deepening strategic dilemma facing the South Korean ruling elite.

In the lead-up to her trip, the South Korean press speculated that she would announce a "North East Asia Peace and Cooperative Initiative" to manage and defuse the growing tensions between the US, Seoul's long-standing imperialist patron, and China, now South Korea's largest trading partner.

During her meeting with US President Barack Obama, however, Park made a public commitment to strengthen the US alliance in order to isolate and threaten North Korea, China's ally. Obama used the meeting with Park to ensure South Korea would not deviate from the anti-Chinese "pivot" Washington has set, which is to function as the prime staging base in any war against Beijing.

When Park came to office, she raised concerns in Washington by promising to change Seoul's unpopular hardline stance on foreign policy, particularly on North Korea, adopted by her conservative predecessor, Lee Myung-bak. A Congressional Research Service report prepared in April highlighted the closeness of the Obama and Lee administrations, stating: "Since late 2008, relations between the United States and South Korea have been arguably at their best state in decades, if not ever."

Since coming to power, Park has proposed two paths for dealing with North Korea, one which calls for retaliation in the event of an attack and the other which calls for dialogue with the North in order to "build trust".

This shift in emphasis is unacceptable to Washington, even as Park's government has continued the close

military cooperation with the US, including holding large-scale joint military exercises involving US nuclear capable bombers in April, aimed against North Korea.

Washington's concerns were compounded when Park proposed a "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperative Initiative", or "Seoul Process" that would include the two Koreas, the United States, as well as China and Japan and address what Park is calling the "Asian Paradox".

According to Park, that paradox is "the disconnect between growing economic interdependence on the one hand, and backward political, security cooperation on the other." She called for "grand reconciliation" between China, Japan and South Korea, paving the way for a vast "free trade zone" between three of the largest economies in Asia. This caused concerns in Washington, which opposes multilateral international organizations in Asia that include major powers but exclude the US.

A major shift appeared to take place following her meeting with Obama last Tuesday, in which she promised her initiative would "reinforce President Obama's strategy of rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific." Following the summit, a declaration marking the sixtieth anniversary of the United States-Republic of Korea Alliance was issued, calling the alliance "a linchpin of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific."

Rather than bringing "peace and stability" to the region, the alliance has been utilized by Washington to further its economic and geopolitical ambitions, most recently in ratcheting up tensions with North Korea, risking the outbreak of a devastating war on the Korean Peninsula. Obama continued this line of bellicose rhetoric in a press conference, declaring that the United States was fully prepared to act "with a full range of

capabilities available, including the deterrents provided by our conventional and nuclear forces.”

The true target of these remarks is not North Korea, but China. In threatening North Korea, the US starkly presented the Pyongyang regime with two choices: fall in line with Washington’s encirclement of China or face potential nuclear annihilation.

Both Obama and Park held up Burma as an example, with Obama stating, “We discussed that Pyongyang should take notice of events in countries like Burma, which, as it reforms, is seeing more trade and investment and diplomatic ties with the world, including the United States and South Korea.”

While Burma continues to be ruled by an oppressive military junta, what has changed is that Burma has begun to withdraw from China’s orbit and open up to the West. Washington would have no qualms of keeping the Stalinist Workers Party in Pyongyang to discipline the North Korean masses, if it kept in line with Washington’s geo-strategic interests.

While Obama declared that Park’s “trust building process” was completely compatible with Washington’s interests, differences remain.

Tensions between South Korea and Japan, two key US allies, remained unresolved and are a major irritant for Washington. Without naming the Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Park made a thinly veiled attack on Tokyo before the US Congress: “For where there is failure to acknowledge honestly what happened yesterday, there can be no tomorrow.”

Abe has repeatedly offended South Korea by denying the crimes of Japanese militarism in World War II and by seeking to revise Japan’s pacifist constitution, as US backing for a more aggressive Japanese role to contain China encouraged chauvinist forces in Japan. This policy, however, has caused tensions not only between China and Japan, but also fears and concerns within the South Korean ruling elite over the revival of Japanese militarism. (See: “South Korea protests against Japanese shrine visits”)

While neither Obama nor Park spoke publicly on the growing disputes between South Korea and Japan, Obama stated, “For our part, we’ll continue to coordinate closely with South Korea and with Japan.” Washington is clearly pressuring Seoul to do the same. Last year, the two US allies came close to signing a

military intelligence agreement, before it was postponed at the last minute by Seoul.

Obama and Park also discussed the Atomic Energy Agreement between the two countries. Recently, it was agreed that it would be extended by two more years, giving the sides more time to negotiate a new deal. Seoul is seeking the right to enrich uranium, which it currently imports, as well as the right to reprocess spent fuel. While Seoul claims this would be only for peaceful purposes, uranium enrichment and reprocessing could also allow South Korea to build nuclear weapons. Calls from within Park’s Saenuri Party to develop its own nuclear weapons have been growing in recent months.

While public pretext is North Korea’s nuclear program, Seoul’s real concern is Japan’s moves towards nuclear armament. Seoul is sure to double its efforts in negotiating a favorable treaty following the recent announcement that Japan plans to open a huge reprocessing plant capable of producing enough weapons-grade plutonium for 2,000 nuclear bombs annually.

The dilemma facing the South Korean ruling elite has not been resolved by Park’s US visit, as Washington shows no sign of easing its aggressive “pivot to Asia” directed at containing China. Last weekend, just as North Korea appeared to remove two medium-range ballistic missiles from launching vehicles, tensions flared up again after the US sent a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz, to Busan for a new round of joint military exercises.



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