

US imposes new sanctions on North Korea

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US President Barack Obama yesterday raised the stakes in the confrontation with North Korea over unsubstantiated allegations that it hacked into Sony Pictures Entertainment, authorising a new round of economic sanctions affecting 10 government officials and three state entities.

The US action is deliberately provocative. The Obama administration imposed the penalties despite the lack of evidence that Pyongyang was responsible for the Sony hacking. North Korea has flatly denied any involvement and offered to conduct a joint investigation with American authorities.

Cyber security experts have increasingly questioned the FBI's allegations against North Korea and pointed to other more likely suspects. Internet security company Norse has handed the FBI evidence indicating that a group of disgruntled Sony employees could have been responsible for the Sony hacking. The FBI simply dismissed the possibility out of hand.

Former US cybercrimes prosecutor Mark Rasch told Reuters this week: "I think the government acted prematurely in announcing unequivocally that it was North Korea before the investigation was complete. There are many theories about who did it and how they did it. The government has to be pursuing all of them."

The entire Sony hacking affair has the character of a US concoction deliberately designed to heighten tensions on the Korean peninsula. Obama's executive order makes no mention of Sony and cites a litany of "provocative, destabilising and repressive actions and policies of the government of North Korea, including its destructive, coercive cyber-related actions" as the pretext for the new penalties.

The sanctions prevent the designated individuals and entities from doing business in the US and block their access to the American banking and financial system. North Korea's main intelligence agency—the Reconnaissance General Bureau—as well as two

allegedly defence-related state companies—the Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation (KOMID) and Korea Tangun Trading Organisation—were sanctioned. Most of the 10 senior officials targeted were connected to KOMID.

When the FBI publicly accused Pyongyang of hacking Sony on December 19, Obama warned that the US would respond "at a time and in a manner of our choosing." Speaking yesterday on the executive order, White House press secretary Josh Earnest said: "Today's actions are the first aspect of our response."

In fact, the Obama administration may well have taken action against Pyongyang already. Two unexplained shutdowns of North Korea's Internet access—the first just days after Obama warned of US retaliation—have taken place over the past fortnight, in all likelihood the result of a cyber attack. American officials have refused to either confirm or deny responsibility.

Obama has also pressed Sony to release its film, *The Interview*, a comedy about a fictional assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Sony, which made the crude film in collaboration with the American military-intelligence apparatus, initially withdrew it from circulation. The film is nothing but a calculated attempt to insult the North Korean leadership and inflame tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Obama has already indicated that his administration will review the 2008 decision of the previous Bush administration to remove North Korea from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. That decision was part of an agreement to denuclearise North Korea, reached in 2007 at six-party talks sponsored by China and including the two Koreas, the US, Russia and Japan. Bush only reluctantly took the terrorism list step after North Korea shut down its nuclear facilities, began dismantling its nuclear reactor and made a comprehensive declaration of its nuclear

programs.

The agreement collapsed months later when the Bush administration unilaterally insisted on a tougher inspection and verification regime for North Korea's nuclear facilities. Since coming to office in 2009, Obama has made no attempt to revive the six-party talks, ensuring that tensions on the Korean peninsula remain high. While occasionally hinting that a rapprochement with Pyongyang might be possible, he has always made clear that price would be very high. At the same time, the US has responded to North Korea nuclear and missile tests with harsh new sanctions and threats.

North Korea has been subject to a virtual economic blockade by the US and its allies since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington's thinly veiled aim has been to precipitate a political and economic crisis in North Korea that would lead to the installation of a pro-US regime. In the *Wall Street Journal* last month, US Council on Foreign Relations president Richard Haass bluntly insisted that the objective had to be: "ending North Korea's existence as an independent entity and reunifying the Korean Peninsula."

The latest US sanctions cut directly across tentative steps towards talks between the two Koreas. In his traditional New Year's speech on Thursday, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un suggested that a summit might be held. "Depending on the mood and circumstances to be created, we have no reason not to hold the highest-level talks," he said.

South Korea's unification minister Ryoo Kihl-jae told the media: "Our government hopes South and North Korea will hold dialogue without further ado in the near future." Last Monday, Ryoo sent a formal proposal for talks to North Korea. In October last year, two top-ranking North Korean officials flew unannounced to South Korea, nominally to observe the closing ceremonies of the 2014 Asian Games, where they held discussions with their South Korean counterparts.

In his speech yesterday, North Korean leader Kim made an appeal to the US for a "bold shift" in its policy towards Pyongyang, and criticised Washington for its "human rights" campaign in the United Nations against North Korea. In November, the Pyongyang regime released two American prisoners following a visit by

US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. The latest sanctions, however, indicate that far from making any move to ease tensions with North Korea, the US is intent on intensifying the confrontation, using the Sony hacking allegations as the pretext.

By targeting Pyongyang, the Obama administration is also heightening the pressure on North Korea's ally, China. Sanctions against North Korea are just one element of the US "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and strategic offensive aimed at undermining Beijing's influence that is destabilising the entire region.



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