

US rejects North Korea overtures

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North Korea has reached out for talks with the United States and South Korea in recent weeks, in an effort to break out of its isolated economic and diplomatic position. The US flatly rejected any talks, while South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye, made only noncommittal remarks in favor of talks with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Pyongyang offered to suspend a fourth nuclear weapon test in a message to the US on January 9. The regime has been threatening to continue testing bombs since it detonated a device in February 2013, but said it would temporarily halt its nuclear program in exchange for the United States calling off joint military drills with South Korea this year.

In response, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki denounced the North's offer as "an implicit threat." While claiming the US remains open to negotiations with Pyongyang, Psaki stated: "We call on the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] to immediately cease all threats, reduce tensions, and take the necessary steps toward denuclearization needed to resume credible negotiations."

North Korea followed this up with offers for direct talks last Tuesday. An Myon-hun, North Korea's deputy ambassador to the UN said: "We are ready, the government of the DPRK is ready, to explain its intention behind its proposal directly to the United States."

Kim Jong-un also offered talks with South Korea in his New Year's address, calling for a summit between the leaders of the two Koreas. In her own speech to mark the New Year on January 12, South Korean President Park Geun-hye offered tentative support for a summit. "My position is that to ease the pain of division and to accomplish peaceful unification, I am willing to meet with anyone," Park said. "If it is helpful, I am up for a summit meeting with the North. There is no pre-condition." However, Park did not make any concrete proposals.

Over the weekend, a group of American academics and former government officials had a meeting in Singapore with Ri Yong Ho, who served as North Korea's chief

negotiator in previous six-party talks involving both Koreas, the US, Japan, China and Russia. There was no indication, however, that the Obama administration is shifting back from the heightened tensions it has provoked on the Korean peninsula.

The US has accused North Korea of hacking Sony Pictures Entertainment in retaliation for the movie, *The Interview*, which depicts the fictional assassination of Kim Jong-un. North Korea has fervently denied the charges, for which the Obama administration has provided no evidence. Numerous Internet and computer experts have cast doubt on the US claims, pointing to other likely perpetrators, including disgruntled Sony employees.

After leveling new sanctions in an executive order against North Korea on January 2, the Obama administration made clear last Tuesday that it was drawing up further measures to intensify Pyongyang's isolation. Daniel Glaser, assistant secretary at the US Treasury Department stated, "We could target any North Korean government agency; we could target any North Korean government official ... we could apply sanctions with respect to any individual or entity who is providing them, in turn, material support."

The campaign against North Korea over the Sony hacking was stepped up on the weekend, with unnamed officials telling the *New York Times* that American agencies had been monitoring North Korean cyber activities since 2010. The lengthy article by the *Times* asserted that the North's intelligence employs a 6,000-strong hacking force and alleged that they operate from within China.

The accusations of hacking are not simply directed against North Korea, but also against China, which still views the North as a strategic buffer against the South, a US ally which hosts significant American military forces. Sung Kim, the US special representative for North Korea, stated recently at a House Foreign Affairs Committee briefing, "We believe there is more that China can do to

bring the necessary pressure to bear so that North Korea concludes it has no choice but to denuclearize and abide by its international obligations.”

South Korea is clearly concerned that any overtures it attempts to make to North Korea could cut across the United States own agenda in the region. Park’s government is moving in lockstep with the US “pivot” to Asia, which includes the systematic military encirclement of China in preparation for conflict and war. South Korea has signed a military intelligence sharing agreement with Washington and Tokyo, expressing support for a Thermal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system on the Korean peninsula, and backed the recent sanctions against North Korea. This makes it unlikely that Seoul will agree to a summit with Pyongyang at a time when the Obama administration is heightening tensions.

Recent developments have further complicated the situation in North East Asia. North Korea, in efforts to alleviate the pressure it is under, has signaled that it is seeking greater assistance from Russia. It was reported last week that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invitation for Kim Jong-un to visit Moscow has been accepted. The visit would take place in May, to mark the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory over the Nazis in World War II. Obama has refused to attend.

It was also revealed on January 9 that North Korea requested that Russia sell it advanced Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets. For the time being, the Putin government has reportedly refused. Under conditions in which it is facing its own US campaign of economic sanctions and intimidation, however, Moscow may change its position. The development of closer military ties between Russia and North Korea would only intensify the US efforts to bring about regime change in both countries.



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