

US defense secretary promotes “pivot” in South Korea

Ben McGrath
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United States Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, who only took office in February, arrived in South Korea on Thursday for a three-day visit, following a stop in Japan. Carter unabashedly promoted Washington’s military and strategic “pivot to Asia,” further ratcheting up pressure on China.

On his first day in South Korea, Carter made clear that the United States is intent on increasing its overall military presence in the country. He held a town hall-style meeting with some 200 select troops at the US air base at Pyeongtaek, south of Seoul. “We are building new stealth fighters, new stealth bombers, and several new ship classes, all equipment and so forth because this [Asia-Pacific region] is a very demanding theater,” Carter declared.

Without mentioning China, Carter clearly pointed to potential military confrontations with Beijing. “We have some of the most demanding kinds of situations and potential military situations also out here ... You will see a lot of new stuff [military hardware] showing up here first. And that is deliberate and that is appropriate.”

Carter met with South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-gu on Friday. At their joint press conference, Carter hypocritically accused China of militarizing the region and not dealing with territorial disputes “in a multilateral, diplomatic fashion.” This was despite the fact that, as his own remarks illustrated, Washington continuously raises tensions in the region, including by deploying advanced weaponry.

Carter and Han denied that the US push for the stationing of an anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea was discussed during their talks. In the event of war with China, the Thermal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system is designed to block any Chinese counter-attack to a first-strike US nuclear

bombardment.

In the recent weeks, South Korea’s ruling Saenuri Party has used last month’s knife attack by a solitary deranged assailant on the US ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert to whip up an anti-North Korean atmosphere in the media and press for a THAAD installation in South Korea.

Carter, however, claimed that because the THAAD system was still in production: “We are not at a point yet of determining where it might be suitably deployed in the future ... We are not at a point where we will begin discussions with anyone around the world.”

This is clearly untrue. In February, Pentagon press secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby stated that the US and South Korea were having “constant discussions” on THAAD. It was also revealed last May that the US had conducted THAAD battery site surveys in South Korea.

Officially, South Korea has not publicly made a decision about a THAAD battery on its territory, with the government saying it would wait until the US made a formal request.

In reality, Washington has been pushing Seoul to join its region-wide missile system alongside Japan. The three countries took a step in that direction in December when they signed a trilateral military intelligence-sharing agreement, a crucial component in a joint missile system.

The THAAD system is designed to intercept short, medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles at an altitude of up to 150 kilometers. It works in conjunction with X-band radar bases, two of which have been installed in Japan.

China is deeply hostile to THAAD being sited on the Korean Peninsula, knowing full well it is aimed at Beijing, and not against a North Korean attack, as

Washington and Seoul claim. China recently warned South Korea that bilateral ties would be severely damaged if a THAAD battery were deployed to the peninsula.

China's state-run *Global Times* ran an editorial rejecting US claims that THAAD is necessary to deal with North Korea. "This is viewed as 'words to beguile kids' by almost every Chinese military analyst. One thing is for certain—the Chinese public's accumulating goodwill toward Seoul would be severely battered if THAAD finally lands in South Korea, and the foundation of the bilateral ties would be shattered," it stated.

Carter also met with President Park Geun-hye, who reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to the "pivot," saying: "[South] Korea, the United States, and Japan should cooperate closely." Both Carter and Park blamed Pyongyang for the escalating frictions in the region. Park accused the North of a "vicious cycle of creating tension."

Before Carter's arrival, North Korea fired two short-range missiles off its west coast last Tuesday. However, Pyongyang's bellicose actions and threats are empty gestures. The North hopes to cut a deal with the US to facilitate the restoration of capitalism. Pyongyang has previously offered up the North Korean working class as a source of ultra-cheap labor by establishing 14 special economic zones.

However, North Korea's actions play right into Washington's hands by providing a justification for its military buildup in the region.

Following Friday's press conference, Carter and Han toured the South Korean navy's 2nd Fleet Command headquarters in Pyeongtaek where the hull of the Cheonan warship is on display. The Cheonan sank on March 26, 2010 in the Yellow Sea following an explosion.

Carter and Han used their base visit to provide supposed proof of North Korean belligerence. A South Korean-led investigation accused a North Korean submarine of torpedoing the vessel and yet remaining undetected, even though the US and South Korean militaries were conducting anti-submarine drills just 75 miles from the site.

Other subsequent investigations suggested that an old mine caused the explosion. A 2012 report by Korea Seismological Institute director Kim So-gu and Dr

Yefim Gitterman of the Geophysical Institute of Israel, published in the international journal *Pure and Applied Geophysics*, backed this theory. The South Korean Defense Ministry simply dismissed the report out of hand.



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