

US secretary of state berates North Korea

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US Secretary of State John Kerry stopped off in South Korea for two days this week after his trip to Beijing where he confronted Chinese leaders over China's activities in the South China Sea. While in Seoul, Kerry took the opportunity to ratchet up tensions with North Korea, which is ultimately aimed at China.

Kerry met his South Korean counterpart Yun Byeong-se on Monday, followed by a press conference, a lecture on cyber security and an address to US military personnel in South Korea. During the press conference Kerry and Yun emphasized the strength of the alliance between the two countries, stating that there was “no daylight” between them.

Kerry and Yun specifically targeted North Korea, ramping up pressure on the Stalinist regime of leader Kim Jong-un. Kerry condemned North Korea's recent ejection test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile as a “flagrant disregard for international law.” The secretary of state also strongly criticized reports of public executions and other human rights abuses in North Korea.

Kerry stated, “As a result of that, we are indeed talking about ways to increase the pressure and increase the potential of either sanctions or other means to make it clear to him [Kim Jong-un] that he is on a very dangerous course in the missile systems and continued pursuit of his nuclear program.”

Kerry's lecture at Korea University on cyber security was also aimed at North Korea. He denounced Pyongyang for “provocative, destabilizing, and repressive actions, including the cyber-attack on Sony Pictures.” Last December, the US made unsubstantiated claims that North Korea had hacked into the computers of Sony Corporation in retaliation for its movie, *The Interview*, which depicted the killing of Kim Jong-un.

Kerry's comments on human rights and international law are entirely cynical. The US regularly turns its back to human rights abuses by allies while utilizing the

same issue to justify military buildup and attacks on opponents. Denunciations of North Korea as a “rogue regime” have been part of the justification for the US “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining Chinese influence and encircling it militarily.

While continuing to cite North Korea as the threat, Kerry said during a speech to US troops late Monday, “This is why we need to deploy ships, forces... and we are talking about THAAD.” THAAD, or Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, is an anti-ballistic missile system that the US plans to deploy throughout Asia. Washington has been pushing for the placement of a THAAD battery to South Korea since at least last spring when it was revealed that the US military was surveying possible locations.

The THAAD system is designed to knock out incoming missiles and is part of the Pentagon's plans for fighting a nuclear war with China. In the event of a first strike by the US, the anti-ballistic missile systems are designed to contain a Chinese counterattack.

US pressure is also being increased on North Korea following recent negotiations with Iran, with an agreement being held out as a road for Pyongyang to follow. As in the case of Iran, Washington's primary concern is not North Korea's limited nuclear capability, but rather to establish relations with Pyongyang more in line with US interests.

Kerry said during the press conference that a deal with Iran could, “serve as an example for North Korea about a better way to move, a better way to try to behave, a more legitimate entry road to the global community and to the norms of international behavior.” Such a rapprochement, however, would be heavily dependent on Pyongyang distancing itself from Beijing.

After decades of sanctions and international isolation enforced by the United States, the North Korean regime confronts a deepening economic and political crisis. Signs have emerged of a factional struggle in the upper

echelons. In December 2013, Kim's uncle Jang Song-thaek was purged and executed. Jang, previously regarded as the power behind Kim, had close relations with China.

Unsubstantiated accounts of the recent execution of Defense Chief Hyon Yong-chol might point to further internal turmoil. South Korea's spy agency, the National Intelligence Service, has made conflicting claims that Hyon had been killed or purged, after initially declaring that he had been executed with an anti-aircraft gun.

Kerry put the onus on China to pressure North Korea over its nuclear programs, declaring, "China has obviously an extraordinary leverage." He reported that Beijing was considering new sanctions on North Korea which is heavily dependent on China for trade and financial assistance.

China, however, is caught in a bind. Beijing does not want to precipitate a collapse of the North Korean regime, which it has regarded as a buffer against US encroachment on the Korean Peninsula. At the same, Pyongyang's nuclear programs and empty threats are exploited by Washington as the pretext for its military build-up in North East Asia.

While in Seoul, Kerry also sought to push South Korea towards closer relations with Japan. These have been undermined by the Japanese government's campaign to whitewash the war crimes of Japanese imperialism during World War II, including the abuse of sex slaves or "comfort women," many of whom were Korean. The South Korean government regularly exploits this issue to whip up nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment to distract from rising social tensions at home.

While declaring the use of so-called comfort women "a terrible, egregious violation of human rights," Kerry stated, "[W]e urge both Japan and South Korea to handle these sensitive historical issues with restraint and continue to engage in direct dialogue towards a mutually accepted resolution that promotes healing while facilitating a future oriented relationship."

Washington is concerned that the dispute could hamper its attempts to integrate Seoul and Tokyo into its military preparations for war against China, including the deployment and coordination of THAAD ballistic missile systems.



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