

Tensions remain high on Korean Peninsula

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24 August 2015

North Korea and South Korea held two rounds of high-level talks over the weekend, yet little has been resolved and tensions are still high on the peninsula. The two sides agreed to the discussions Saturday, shortly before the expiration of a North Korean ultimatum demanding Seoul cease propaganda broadcasts across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or face military action. The militaries of both countries remain on high alert.

Held at the Panmunjom border village in the DMZ, the closed-door talks began at 6:00 p.m. Seoul time on Saturday and lasted throughout the night, ending Sunday at 4:15 a.m. The two sides met again the same day at 3:30 p.m., with discussions continuing into Monday morning. Seoul is demanding an apology for an August 4 landmine explosion along the DMZ that it blamed on the North while Pyongyang is insisting on a halt to South Korean propaganda broadcasts across the border, resumed after the explosion. The North has denied involvement in the land mine incident.

Representing the South are National Security Advisor Kim Kwan-jin and Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo. They met with their counterparts from the North, Hwang Pyong-so, director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army and top aide to leader Kim Jong-un, and Kim Yang-gon, director of the United Front Department.

Seoul and Washington have both kept pressure on Pyongyang. "The North is showing an ambivalent attitude. The alliance of South Korea and the United States will react to any provocations," South Korea's Defense Ministry warned on Sunday.

US State Department spokeswoman Gabrielle Price said: "We are carefully monitoring the situation. We will continue to coordinate closely with the ROK (Republic of Korea) and remain steadfast in our commitment to the defense of our allies."

Despite the talks, Seoul, backed by Washington, is

whipping up a scare campaign against North Korea, painting it as the sole aggressor. On Monday morning, it claimed that the North sent 10 amphibious landing craft with special forces to a naval base near the western border on the Yellow Sea.

The South Korean military also alleged that North Korea doubled its artillery along the DMZ over the weekend and deployed about 70 percent of its submarine fleet—some 50 vessels—as their whereabouts were supposedly unknown. "This is a typical North Korean tactic of talking on one hand and brandishing military power on the other to try to force their way," a Defense Ministry official declared.

On Saturday, however, the US and South Korea staged their own dangerous provocation near the border with North Korea, sending four US F-16 fighter jets and four South Korean F-15K fighter jets on simulated bombing runs designed to "alarm North Korea." An official from South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it was "a flight aimed to show off the military might of South Korea" and the "combined air force power" of the US and the South.

Washington responded to tensions on the Korean Peninsula in 2013 in a similarly reckless fashion, dispatching nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers to South Korea at the height of the confrontation. The US press revealed that these threatening steps were part of the Pentagon's "playbook" of prearranged measures designed to intimidate the North.

The current stand-off began on August 4 when two South Korean sergeants were maimed by an explosion while on patrol along the DMZ. On August 10, Seoul and Washington accused North Korea of planting three landmines at a gate, supposedly well-known as part of the patrol route. While Pyongyang denied involvement, South Korea restarted propaganda broadcasts across the DMZ for the first time in 11 years using large speakers, angering the North, which has threatened to destroy

them numerous times.

Last Thursday, the North Korean military reportedly fired a single 14.5mm anti-aircraft shell that landed on an uninhabited hill in the South, then fired several more rounds from a 76.2mm gun. The South Korean army responded with a barrage of 155mm rounds an hour later, after consultations with the US. Neither side reported any casualties.

Pyongyang then issued a 48-hour ultimatum to halt the propaganda broadcasts or face additional military measures. The following day, Pyongyang declared a “quasi-state of war.”

The Stalinist North Korean regime is faced with a deep crisis as a result of the far-reaching economic isolation and sanctions imposed by Washington and its allies. Pyongyang has already taken significant steps toward pro-market restructuring, but, without the normalization of relations with the US and an easing of the embargo, its economy continues to stagnate.

North Korea has demonstrated that it is more than willing to offer up the working class as a source of ultra-cheap labor at the Kaesong Industrial Complex near the border with South Korea. Unlike in 2013, the complex, which is a source of much-needed foreign exchange, is still open. While Seoul has blocked non-essential personnel from crossing the border, South Korean businessmen have continued to operate at the industrial center.

North Korea’s often bellicose, but empty, rhetoric is aimed at providing the regime with a bit of leverage. However, it plays directly into Washington’s hands. The US exploits the “threat” posed by the unstable Stalinist state to boost its military presence throughout North East Asia, which is aimed not so much at North Korea but China, the country’s neighbor and ally.

Since coming to office in 2009, President Obama has blocked any attempt to restart six-party talks sponsored by China to address North Korea’s nuclear programs. Instead, the US has responded to every crisis on the Korean Peninsula by adopting a confrontational stance toward Pyongyang, greatly heightening the danger of a slide into military conflict.

Washington’s belligerence is part of Obama’s far broader “pivot to Asia”—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at subordinating China and ensuring US dominance throughout the region. This reckless policy has greatly inflamed

tensions throughout Asia, including dangerous flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula.



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