

US, South Korean leaders hold summit

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21 October 2015

US President Barack Obama met with South Korean President Park Geun-hye last Friday in Washington for the pair's fourth bilateral summit. While seeming to focus largely on North Korea and its alleged nuclear threat, underlying the affair were growing concerns in the US political establishment over Seoul's relationship with China.

Park, traveling with Defense Minister Han Min-gu, began a four-day visit of the US on October 13, which culminated in the summit with Obama. The two leaders met and held a joint press conference while releasing a joint statement aimed at North Korea. It stated: "The United States-Republic of Korea alliance remains committed to countering the threat to peace and security posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs as well as other provocations."

During the press conference, Obama indicated the possibility of a deal with North Korea, stating: "As my administration has shown with Iran and with Cuba, we are also prepared to engage nations with which we've had troubled histories. But Pyongyang needs to understand that it will not achieve the economic development it seeks so long as it clings to nuclear weapons." At the same time, Obama made clear that talks would only be considered after North Korea fully met Washington's demands.

The trip afforded Park the opportunity to reiterate her support for Washington's "pivot to Asia," aimed at militarily surrounding and economically subordinating China to US interests. Park said in her own statement: "The Korea-U.S. alliance is the linchpin of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific. And there exists a synergy between President Obama's rebalancing policy in the Asia Pacific and our Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, or NAPCI."

Park's initiative has been promoted as a means for Seoul to build trust with other countries in Northeast Asia. However, Park made clear during her first visit to

the US in May 2013 that the NAPCI would "reinforce President Obama's strategy of rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific." Far from building trust, Park has used the initiative to try and further isolate North Korea, particularly from its main ally and trade partner China.

However, there have been some concerns in Washington, especially following Park's attendance at a large military parade on September 3 in Beijing to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Park appeared alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

During her joint press conference with Obama, Park was questioned about her presence at the parade. Park responded by referring to North Korea, saying: "Now, I met with President Xi in China, and I also met with the leaders of Russia. And the North Korean nuclear issue in our region, in Northeast Asia and even the world, it's a very large threat. And this is something that we need to make concerted efforts to resolve."

Obama lent support to Park's efforts, saying, "There's no contradiction between the Republic of Korea having good relations with us, being a central part of our alliance and having good relations with China." However, he also made clear that he expected Seoul to speak out more against China as conflicts in the region grow.

Victor Cha of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) summed up the feelings of some in US ruling circles: "There's been some nail-biting, hand-wringing, head-scratching when they saw that picture of the three of them (Xi, Putin and Park)." Cha explained that Park, with the understanding of the US, has attempted to pull Beijing closer to Seoul and away from Pyongyang.

US concerns have deepened though, as relations between South Korea and Japan, which Washington regards as a crucial aspect of the "pivot," have suffered.

The right-wing Fox News outlet published an opinion piece on October 13, the day of Park’s arrival in the US, entitled, “President Park should publicly apologize for South Korea’s sexual violence in Vietnam.” The editorial outlined a number of the war crimes, including the raping of women, committed by South Korean troops during the Vietnam War, when they were dispatched to aid the US in attempting to subjugate the country.

South Korean war crimes in Vietnam have often been used by the far-right in Japan and their apologists in the US to downplay and justify Japan’s abuse of “comfort women”—a euphemism for sex slaves—during World War II. Rather than expressing any genuine concern for the victims in Vietnam, this section of the US ruling class hopes to pressure Park to adopt a more conciliatory tone with Tokyo, including on her criticism of Japan’s war-time record.

At the same time, despite the regular claims that there are “no cracks” between Seoul and Washington, fissures could be observed during the recent visit. Defense Minister Han Min-gu met with Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, hoping to secure four key technology transfers for fighter jets. Carter turned down the request, despite several appeals by South Korea, which wants to use the technology to develop its own fighters.

Last November, the US banned South Korea from sending a fighter jet made with US technology to an airshow in China, raising the possibility of more underlying tensions over Seoul’s relationship with Beijing than is currently being reported.

In September, Lockheed Martin won a contract to sell 40 F-35A fighters to South Korea at an estimated cost of \$115 million each. To secure the deal, Lockheed Martin agreed to the technology transfer to allow South Korea to develop a fighter similar to the F-16. Without the company securing the rights to transfer the technology, however, the sale as a whole may fall through. In all likelihood, Washington is using the deal to pressure Seoul to fall into line with its agenda against China.



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