US, China tensions sharpen after North Korean nuclear test

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In the wake of North Korea's nuclear test this week, China yesterday rejected comments by US Secretary of State John Kerry suggesting that Beijing had failed to rein in its ally, Pyongyang, and should take tougher measures to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

After speaking to his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on Thursday, Kerry told the media that China's "particular approach" to North Korea had "not worked" and warned that "we cannot continue business as usual." The United States and South Korea are reportedly holding top-level discussions on stationing "strategic weapons"—that is, nuclear bombs and associated delivery systems—on the Korean Peninsula.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying responded, saying: "China is not the cause and crux of the Korean nuclear issue, nor is it the key to resolving the problem." She declared "all other parties should keep a cool head, stay on the path toward a peaceful solution, and avoid taking actions that sharpen disputes and raise tensions."

Hua reiterated China's call for the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and a return to stalled six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia. An international agreement on North Korea's nuclear programs broke down in 2008 after the Bush administration unilaterally and provocatively demanded a tougher inspection regime. Obama has stymied any resumption of talks by insisting that North Korea accede to US demands in advance.

Hua's reference to denuclearisation is implicitly directed against the US stationing nuclear weapons in South Korea. Following North Korea's previous nuclear test in 2013, the Pentagon flew nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 bombers to South Korea during joint military exercises. Standard US military protocol neither confirms nor denies that warships and strategic bombers are carrying nuclear weapons.

A commentary in China's hawkish, state-run *Global Times* cited academic Lu Chao, who warned that "the US was overreacting as military deployment would only aggravate tensions in the region and the situation may spiral out of control." He nevertheless declared that the deployment of military assets was "possible as the US will not dismiss the chance to expand its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, neither will its ally Japan."

The US threat to base nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula is not aimed primarily at North Korea and its rudimentary nuclear arsenal. Rather Washington is engaged in a military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region as part of its "pivot to Asia" directed against China and seeking to ensure continued American hegemony. The stationing of nuclear capable bombers and ships in South Korea, directly adjacent to the Chinese mainland, would represent a major escalation and fuel tensions with Beijing.

China is caught in a bind. It has been pressuring its ally North Korea to wind back its nuclear programs, including by agreeing to new UN sanctions in 2013. At the same time, drastic economic sanctions could precipitate the collapse of the unstable regime in Pyongyang and open up the possibility of a US-aligned state on China's northern borders. North Korea depends heavily on trade with China, as well as Chinese aid.

The threatened US military build-up in South Korea underscores the reckless and reactionary character of North Korea's decision to detonate another nuclear weapon. The Stalinist leadership's response to the deepening social and economic crisis at home is to ramp up its nationalist and militaristic rhetoric, which

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serves only to divide workers in North Korea from those in South Korea, Japan and internationally.

Pyongyang's prime motivation is to exploit its nuclear arsenal as a bargaining chip in refashioning relations with imperialism. No peace treaty was ever reached with the US or South Korea in 1953 to end the Korean War and since then the country has been subject to an economic blockade by the US and its allies.

The North Korean regime is desperate to open up the country as a cheap labour platform for foreign investors and is expanding its network of free trade zones throughout the country. However, without an end to the decades-long confrontation with the US and North Korea's integration into the global capitalist market, foreign investment in the country has remained a tiny trickle.

Reuters reported yesterday that North Korea had sent a message to China declaring that it was seeking a peace treaty with the US, China and South Korea, and warning that it would not stop its nuclear testing until it had one. "North Korea will do it to the end until China and the United States want to sign a peace treaty," a high-level North Korean source told the news agency.

The source said he had relayed the message to Beijing immediately after the nuclear test, urging China to support the push for a treaty. China had not been informed of the test in advance. Referring to the US demand that North Korea give up its nuclear programs prior to any negotiations, he urged Beijing "not to follow the United States."

Washington has a long history of reaching deals with the North Korea over its nuclear programs and not keeping its promises. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework reached with the Clinton administration, North Korea froze its nuclear activity and shut down its only reactor at Yongbyon in exchange for supplies of fuel oil and the construction of two light water reactors (LWR). By the time Clinton's term ended in 2000, virtually no progress had been made on the LWRs.

On taking office, President George Bush ordered a lengthy review of US policy toward North Korea, effectively sabotaged the Agreed Framework and ratcheted up the confrontation with Pyongyang. In 2002, he branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil," along with Iran and Iraq. Bush only agreed to China's proposal for six-party talks under conditions where the US occupation forces in Iraq were hard-pressed, then scuttled the resulting agreement in 2008.

US imperialism has repeatedly used North Korea as a convenient pretext to justify its large military presence in North East Asia and to put pressure on China. President Obama, who has deliberately inflamed flashpoints throughout the Asia-Pacific as part of his "pivot to Asia," is not about to make any concessions over North Korea and will undoubtedly exploit its nuclear test to accelerate Washington's war drive against China.

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