

North Korean satellite launch heightens US-China tensions

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North Korea yesterday went ahead with its planned satellite launch, ignoring international opposition, including concern expressed by China. The launch was immediately condemned by the US and its allies. Coming a month after North Korea carried out its fourth nuclear test, the event will escalate tensions in North East Asia.

Pyongyang's decision to proceed is a slap in the face to its ally China, which only last week sent veteran diplomat Wu Dawei to North Korea to persuade its leadership to call off the launch. The regime not only snubbed Wu but sent the satellite into orbit a day ahead of the previously announced schedule. Beijing is already under intense pressure from Washington to impose tough new sanctions on Pyongyang, but is reluctant to precipitate an economic and political crisis in North Korea.

There is nothing progressive about North Korea's efforts to develop nuclear weapons and associated missile technology. Its small, rudimentary nuclear arsenal and equally primitive rocket technology are no defence against the US, which could annihilate North Korea's military and industrial capacity many times over. Furthermore, Pyongyang's nationalistic grandstanding and threats provide Washington with a convenient pretext to accelerate its military build-up in Asia.

The US and Japan seized on the satellite launch to call an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council and push through a resolution condemning North Korea and foreshadowing new sanctions. US National Security Adviser Susan Rice branded Pyongyang's actions as "destabilising and provocative" and declared North Korea in breach of previous UN resolutions banning its testing of ballistic missile technology.

US allies in Europe and Asia all joined the chorus of

condemnation and magnified the "threat" posed by the launch. France's UN ambassador Francois Delattre accused North Korea of an "outrageous provocation" that threatened the future of the international non-proliferation regime. British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said yesterday that he had spoken to his Japanese counterpart and both agreed on the need for strong UN action.

While the rocket technology required to launch a satellite would aid in the development of long-range ballistic missiles, the US and the international media routinely conflate the two. However, as Melissa Hanham from the James Martin Centre for Nonproliferation Studies explained to the *Washington Post*: "This kind of rocket is designed as a space launch vehicle. Before we can consider it an inter-continental ballistic missile, there are a number of modifications that have to be made."

As in the past, Washington is exploiting Pyongyang's actions to intensify pressure on Beijing. Following North Korea's fourth nuclear test, US Secretary of State John Kerry visited China to demand it impose measures, including restrictions on the provision of oil, which would cripple the North Korean economy. Beijing has rejected such sanctions, which could trigger the collapse of the regime and undermine China's security through the installation of a pro-US government in Pyongyang.

Last Friday, President Barack Obama rang Chinese President Xi Jinping to again insist on tough measures against North Korea. Following the satellite launch, China expressed "regret" at Pyongyang's action and appealed for restraint on all sides and a return to negotiations. Beijing has been the sponsor of the six-party talks that broke down in 2009 after the US unilaterally demanded tougher inspections of North

Korea's nuclear facilities.

Pyongyang's nuclear tests and rocket launches are in large measure a desperate and futile attempt to force Washington to reach an agreement to end its protracted blockade of the country which has been in place since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The Obama administration has repeatedly made clear that it has no intention of negotiating unless North Korea agrees to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs in advance.

No agreement has been reached as yet between the US and China over new UN sanctions. However, the US Congress is currently working on unilateral legislation that would impact not only on North Korea, but also China. Modelled on the crippling US sanctions imposed on Iran, the measures would penalise North Korean entities and individuals, as well as anyone doing business with them. Given that China is by far North Korea's trading partner, such sanctions would fall heavily on Chinese companies by preventing them from conducting business with the United States.

More ominously, the US is exploiting the latest nuclear test and rocket launch to justify its accelerating military expansion and restructuring in the Indo-Pacific region. The build-up is part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at subordinating China to US economic and strategic interests and maintaining American hegemony throughout the region.

Following last month's nuclear test, the Pentagon flew a nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bomber to South Korea and indicated that discussions were underway with South Korean officials to station "strategic assets" in the country. Such assets—aircraft, submarines and warships capable of launching a nuclear attack—are not only a military threat to North Korea, but also to nearby China.

In the wake of yesterday's satellite launch, the US and South Korea announced that formal discussions would begin on the placement of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) battery in South Korea "at the earliest possible date." The installation would be integrated with two batteries stationed in Japan, along with other anti-missile systems. The THAAD system is designed to intercept and destroy incoming ballistic missiles.

South Korea has resisted US pressure to install the THAAD system so as not to offend China, its largest

trading partner. The deployment of THAAD batteries in North East Asia is part of the Pentagon's plans for fighting a nuclear war with China. Far from being defensive in character, the anti-ballistic missile systems are designed to neutralise China's ability to retaliate in the event of a first nuclear strike by the US.

China's Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin yesterday stated that China was deeply concerned about the THAAD announcement. The joint US-South Korean statement claimed that the THAAD system, if deployed, would be targeted only against North Korea. However, such assurances are meaningless. In the event of war on the Korean Peninsula, the US will assume full operational control of the South Korean military, including the THAAD batteries, under longstanding military operation plan (OPLAN) arrangements between the two countries.

After North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, the US dramatically escalated tensions on the Korean Peninsula. During the annual joint military exercises in March and April that year, the Pentagon sent nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea to send a menacing warning to Pyongyang, and also Beijing. Three years later, the US military build-up in Asia is significantly more advanced and the entire region is more tense. This is heightening the danger of an incident or accident on the Korean Peninsula precipitating a confrontation that spirals out of control into a war between nuclear-armed powers.



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