

US prepares harsh new sanctions on North Korea

Peter Symonds
12 February 2016

In the wake of North Korea's nuclear test last month and its satellite launch on the weekend, the US and its allies are escalating a dangerous confrontation with Pyongyang through a series of new punitive measures.

With negotiations still underway in the United Nations over a new resolution on North Korea, the US Senate pre-empted their outcome on Wednesday by unanimously passing legislation imposing sweeping unilateral sanctions. The new measures, which leave the US president little scope for discretion, target individuals and entities engaged in business with North Korea across a range of activities.

The Senate bill would mandate penalties for anyone involved in trade or financial transactions that allegedly support the North Korea's nuclear, weapons, precious metals and raw materials industries, human rights abuses and cyber threats. Penalties could include seizure of assets, visa bans and denial of government contracts. The bill is virtually identical to legislation passed last month in the US House of Representatives.

The measures are similar to US legislation used to force tougher international action against Iran by targeting those engaged in business transactions with Tehran. In the case of North Korea, the bill is aimed squarely at China, which is Pyongyang's only ally and largest trading partner by far. Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Bob Corker made no bones about the legislation's objective: "When we have 'partners' on the UN Security Council that are unwilling to take steps, it means even more so that this body ... had got to be proactive."

The Obama administration has not indicated that it will veto the legislation. In fact, the White House, which has been pressing Beijing for weeks to impose tough new sanctions on North Korea, including a severe reduction in oil supplies, will use the bill to try

to strong arm China to take tougher measures against North Korea.

As it has previously, Washington is exploiting North Korea's nuclear test and rocket launch to pressure China for concessions and to justify the US military build-up in North East Asia and more broadly throughout the region. This military expansion is not primarily aimed at North Korea and its limited nuclear arsenal but is part of the US preparations for war with China and its "pivot to Asia."

In the aftermath of last weekend's satellite launch, the US and South Korea announced formal talks for the basing of the sophisticated THAAD anti-ballistic missile system on the Korean Peninsula. The Pentagon already has two THAAD systems and associated long-range radars based in Japan that would be used in the event of nuclear war with China. South Korea has to date resisted US demands to host a THAAD base so as not to alienate China, the country's largest trading partner.

Backed by Washington, Seoul announced on Wednesday an indefinite "complete shutdown" of the Kaesong Industrial Complex just over the border in North Korea where 124 South Korean companies employ more than 54,000 North Korean workers. The joint economic project is one of the few remaining symbols of the so-called Sunshine Policy nominally aimed at the peaceful unification of the two Koreas. US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel told the media that South Korea's decision was in line with the position of the "international community"—that is, of Washington.

The Kaesong complex has been a major source of foreign exchange and thus its closure is a blow to North Korea, which is already extremely isolated economically. Pyongyang responded by denouncing the

suspension as a “declaration of war” and announced a military takeover of the area. After South Korean companies pulled personnel and goods out of the zone on Thursday, South Korean authorities announced that the electricity supply to the complex had been shut off, effectively cutting power and water.

The closure of the Kaesong complex is a sharp warning of rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The industrial complex was closed in 2013 amid an escalating confrontation over North Korea’s nuclear tests and missile launches, during which the Pentagon flew nuclear capable B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea as a menacing warning to Pyongyang. Unlike in 2013, when the closure was prompted by the withdrawal of North Korean workers, South Korea initiated the current shutdown, for the first time.

The South Korean Defence Ministry has declared that the annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint military exercises with the United States will be the largest ever. Due to begin on March 7 and last until April 30, the war games last year involved some 210,000 South Korean soldiers and 12,000 American troops, along with war planes and warships.

The *Korea Times* reported yesterday that the US Joint Chiefs of Staff were planning to include additional strategic assets in the exercises, including B-52 and B-2 bombers, F-22 Raptor stealth fighters and a nuclear-powered submarine. The aircraft carrier USS John C Stennis and its full strike group are already slated to participate.

The presence of aircraft, submarines and warships capable of launching nuclear strikes lends credence to a report last month in the British-based *Telegraph* declaring that South Korea and the US were considering “simulating a pre-emptive strike against North Korea’s nuclear weapons capabilities.” The two sides signed a new joint wartime operational plan known as OPLAN 5015 last June, which, according to the *Korea Times*, “reportedly includes the concept of pre-emptive strikes against the North’s key facilities in the event of a necessary contingency.”

Whether or not the simulated pre-emptive strikes proceed, the annual joint exercises are a thinly disguised and highly provocative rehearsal for all-out war with North Korea. South Korea’s decision to shut down the Kaesong industrial complex prior to the war games is an indication that Washington and Seoul are

clearing the decks for a confrontation with Pyongyang during the exercises.

The US can count on the North Korean regime to provide a pretext. Pyongyang’s reactionary nationalist blustering, along with its nuclear and rockets tests, far from defending North Korea from imperialist intervention only help facilitate the US military build-up and provocations within the region. Behind all the anti-imperialist posturing and military grandstanding, Pyongyang is seeking to strike a deal with US imperialism that would end the protracted American blockade of the country and open it up as a cheap labour platform for Western investors.



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