South Korea whips up fears over North Korea's nuclear program

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25 February 2016

The South Korean administration, supported by the opposition parties, is whipping up a hysterical campaign of vilification directed against North Korea following its nuclear test in January and this month's rocket launch. Seoul is seeking to further isolate Pyongyang as it deepens its own preparations for war in alliance with the United States.

Last Friday, the government announced it was preparing for possible terrorist attacks by North Korea after a briefing of leading party members by the country's spy agency. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) made unsubstantiated claims that Pyongyang has ordered a variety of attacks, including the poisoning of South Korean government officials and well-known North Korean defectors, and even attacks on subways or shopping centers.

Lee Cheol-u, a lawmaker of the ruling Saenuri Party and former senior NIS official, followed up by warning: "Having performed a nuclear and missile test in January-February, North Korea is highly likely to perform cyberattacks in March-April, before its national party convention slated for May."

All of this is designed to create a public climate of fear to justify military preparations against North Korea. The NIS, formerly known as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency under Park Chung-hee, the military dictator and father of the current president, has a long history of fabricating information to meet political ends.

On February 16, while speaking at the National Assembly, President Park Geun-hye issued a blunt threat against North Korea: "From this moment on, the government will employ tougher and more effective measures to create an environment in which the North keenly realizes that nuclear development does not offer the path to survival but will merely hasten the regime's collapse, and therefore has no choice but to change of its own volition."

The government hailed the new unilateral sanctions imposed last week by the United States. These are designed not only to penalize North Korea but any entities and individuals that facilitate trade and financial transactions that supposedly support its nuclear, weapons, precious metals and raw materials programs, human rights abuses or cyber threats. These sanctions are aimed squarely at China, which is North Korea's largest trading partner by far.

The interim leader of the main opposition Minjoo Party of Korea issued a similarly aggressive statement earlier this month. "North Korea cannot maintain its system for long by developing nuclear weapons and firing long-range missiles," Kim Jong-in declared in Paju, a city on the border with the North. "I'm confident that the North Korean regime will be annihilated and unification will come one day."

Kim's statement provoked concern within the opposition party, which has typically tried to exploit widespread anti-war sentiment to secure support. Previous Democrat presidents have championed the so-called Sunshine Policy aimed at opening up North Korea as a cheap labor platform for South Korean businesses.

Earlier this month, however, President Park shut down the Kaesong economic zone, just over the border in North Korea, effectively ending the last remnant of the Sunshine Policy.

The US and South Korea are actively preparing to destabilize North Korea. Their new joint Operational Plan 5015, which was formally adopted in November, calls for preemptive military attacks on North Korea and its leadership in the event of war.

The annual joint US-South Korean military

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exercises—Key Resolve and Foal Eagle—due to run from March 7 to April 30 will be based on OPLAN 5015. Defense Minister Han Min-gu has boasted that Key Resolve and Foal Eagle will be "the biggest yet" and involve 290,000 military personnel from the South and 15,000 from the US.

A South Korean military official told the media last week that the war games would simulate the seizure of the entire Korean Peninsula. "This year's operations will involve recovering key facilities that are located deep within North Korea, all the way near its northern borders," he said.

According to the *Korea Herald*, the official also stated: "The scenario will include the special operations forces being deployed to border areas adjacent to China and Russia." These are zones where troops would be expected to prevent the Chinese or Russian militaries from taking any action on the Korean Peninsula. In other words, American and South Korean military planners are already preparing for a far wider war in the event of conflict with North Korea.

In response to North Korea's nuclear test, the US flew a nuclear capable B-52 bomber to South Korea and suggested that it would consider placing "strategic assets" in South Korea. Last Wednesday, the US sent four F-22 stealth fighters to the Korean Peninsula from an air base in Okinawa. Other assets such as B-2 stealth bombers and the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis will participate in next month's joint exercises.

The US and South Korea have already initiated formal talks over the deployment of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery to South Korea. The announcement has provoked concerns in China and Russia that the THAAD system will be directed at undermining their nuclear capability. The US has repeatedly exploited North Korea's actions to justify its military build-up in the region as part of its "pivot to Asia," directed against China in particular.

Besides military measures, South Korea is also challenging North Korea on the diplomatic front, recently querying the latter's UN membership. Seoul's ambassador to the UN, O Jun, told the UN Security Council that North Korea's actions over the past decade had breached "both the letter and spirit of the pledge it made" to comply with the obligations of the UN Charter. This breach, he declared, "calls into question its qualification as a member of the United Nations."

While it is possible to expel a member state according to Article II of the UN Charter, such a move has very little precedent. South Korea hopes to further cut off North Korea, which is already one of the most isolated states in the world, and compound the political crisis in the Pyongyang regime, with unpredictable and dangerous consequences.

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