

US, China agree to new UN sanctions on North Korea

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The United States and China agreed last Thursday to harsh new UN sanctions against North Korea over its recent nuclear and rocket tests. The draft resolution was presented to members of the UN Security Council, with a vote expected soon. The sanctions, pushed by Washington, are designed to further isolate North Korea and cripple its economy.

While the full text of the resolution has not been released, several key points have been made public. Washington's ambassador to the UN Samantha Power declared that the measures would be the toughest in 20 years. "These sanctions, if adopted, would send an unambiguous and unyielding message to the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] regime. The world will not accept your proliferation. There will be consequences for your actions," she said.

The US has exploited North Korea's nuclear programs to justify its military build-up in North East Asia, which is directed primarily at Beijing, not Pyongyang. The latest round of UN measures follow new unilateral US sanctions voted by Congress and approved by Obama last week, which will not only penalise North Korea but companies and individuals doing business with it—above all, in China, Pyongyang's largest trading partner by far.

The far-reaching UN sanctions threaten to further destabilise the already highly unstable regime in Pyongyang. They include:

- All UN member states would be required to inspect shipments, whether by land, sea, or air, bound for and departing from North Korea for any banned goods, including those that could be used in its nuclear or rocket programs. The bans would extend to materials that could be used in chemical or biological weapon programs, as well as to tougher restrictions on luxury goods.

- Any companies, such as North Korea's Ocean Maritime Management Company Limited, suspected of engaging in actions that violate the sanctions would have their port calls or flights barred.

- North Korea would be subject to a full weapons ban, which would apply not only to small arms and other conventional weapons, but to anything that could potentially be used for military purposes, including trucks.

- All financial transactions between North Korea and other countries would be banned and assets frozen if there is a belief that the funds are being used by Pyongyang for its weapon programs. In general, all North Korean financial institutions would be barred from opening new offices or branches overseas. The financial corporations of other nations would similarly be prevented from expanding within North Korea.

- A ban would be imposed on a range of North Korean exports, including gold, titanium ore and rare earth metals. Pyongyang would be able to buy oil and sell coal—a concession to China—but only for "livelihood purposes." The import of any materials, such as aviation fuel, that could potentially have a military application will also be banned.

As most of North Korea's trade is with China, the UN sanctions will put enormous pressure on Beijing, which is already being accused by Washington of not doing enough to rein in Pyongyang. The sweeping character of the new sanctions leave plenty of scope for new US accusations that China is aiding North Korea's

weapons programs by allowing the entry of dual-use articles or funds that are being siphoned off for banned purposes.

Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Bruce Klingner, a former US intelligence official now with the right-wing Heritage Foundation, declared that the restrictions on North Korean exports were “a significant ratcheting up of pressure” that would also raise the question of whether “China is severing or severely curtailing its economic trade with North Korea.” He condemned China for being “lax in enforcing its own export rules, let alone UN resolutions” and turning “a blind eye to North Korean proliferation.”

Choi Gyeong-su, head of the North Korea Resources Institute in Seoul, commented: “You can’t determine which part of the mineral trade is related to people’s livelihoods or not.” But the South Korean government used this very rationale to justify the closure earlier this month of the Kaesong Industrial Complex—a cheap labour zone across the border where South Korean companies employed North Korean workers.

Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo claimed on February 14 that 70 percent of the funds earned at Kaesong had gone to North Korea’s weapon programs. The following day, Hong backtracked and admitted there was no evidence for his claims, but this has not prevented Seoul from continuing to make the allegation.

China has been pushing for a peaceful resolution to the confrontation over North Korea’s weapons programs. Commenting on the draft resolution, Liu Jieyi, Beijing’s UN ambassador, said it should “pave the way for a negotiated solution down the road, not be a stone wall.”

Beijing is deeply concerned that the US is exploiting North Korea’s nuclear and rocket tests to beef up its military presence in South Korea, including nuclear-capable strategic assets and the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system. China also fears that a collapse of the North Korean regime could lead to a unified Korea, backed by US troops, directly on its northern border.

The US military is certainly preparing for war to intervene in North Korea. Large-scale annual joint US-South Korea military exercises, designated as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve, will start this month. For the first time, these war games will be based on the new

Operational Plan 5015 agreed last year, whose scenarios include preemptive strikes on North Korean military positions and the assassination of officials, as well as the complete seizure of the Korean Peninsula.

General Curtis Scaparrotti, head of US forces in South Korea, spelled out the implications of such a war. He told the House Armed Services Committee last Wednesday: “Given the size of the forces and the weaponry involved, this would be more akin to the Korean War and World War II—very complex, probably high casualty.” Conflict on the Korean Peninsula would inevitably draw in other countries, including China.

The United States is chiefly responsible for the political crisis in Pyongyang and the sharp rise in tensions on the Korean Peninsula, having isolated North Korea for decades and scuttled previous agreements over Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Now as part of its “pivot to Asia” and military build-up against China, the US is deliberately exacerbating a dangerous flashpoint that could trigger a devastating conflict that would engulf the entire region.



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