

South Korea imposes extra sanctions on North Korea

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South Korea's imposition of unilateral sanctions on North Korea on March 8 has further heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula following new UN Security Council sanctions adopted on March 2, under duress from the US.

Washington and Seoul have exploited Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test in January and a rocket launch last month to impose penalties that are intended to cripple North Korea's economy, accentuate the political crisis in Pyongyang and, in doing so, intensify the pressure on China and Russia.

While the new UN sanctions barred the export of materials such as gold, titanium ore and rare earth metals from North Korea, as well as the import of all weapons and aviation fuel, they allow trade in coal, iron ore and oil so long as it is for "livelihood purposes."

China pressed for this last condition, fearing that the North Korean regime would be pushed to the brink of collapse if it were starved of oil and unable to earn income from its mineral exports. While Beijing opposed the North Korean nuclear tests, it is deeply concerned that a political implosion in Pyongyang could result in the unification of the Korean peninsula under a government aligned with Washington.

Lee Seok-jun, minister of the government policy coordination office, justified the unilateral South Korean sanctions by declaring: "The government will continue to sanction and press the North in close cooperation with the international community so as to create conditions where there is nothing for it but to change." In reality, South Korea, in league with the US, is pushing for regime-change in Pyongyang.

The new South Korean sanctions go further than the UN Security Council resolution in choking the North Korean economy. Foreign ships that have visited North

Korea in the previous 180 days will be banned from entering South Korean waters. Seoul hopes it will prevent third countries from doing business with Pyongyang. Last year, 66 ships that had been to North Korea made 104 stops in South Korea as well, according to the government, which also stated these vessels were loaded with steel and general merchandise. Japan imposed similar sanctions last month.

The South Korean government also intends to draw up a list of items that other countries will be required to ban if the goods are made in, or with materials originating in, North Korea.

By these measures, countries that wish to trade with South Korea will be forced to limit economic ties with Pyongyang. This is particularly aimed at China, which is North Korea's only major trading partner. In addition, some 40 individuals and 30 business entities in North Korea have been blacklisted.

Seoul has also suspended a trilateral trade cooperation agreement with North Korea and Russia known as the Khasan-Rajin project. This deal included the construction of a railway line between the Russian border town of Khasan and the North Korean port town of Rajin. Siberian coal was to be transported to the port then loaded onto ships for delivery to South Korea. In 2014-2015, three trial runs took place with Chinese ships.

The project's suspension is noteworthy as Russia had threatened to veto the UN sanctions resolution if the project was to be banned. Before the South Korean sanctions were formally announced, Je Seong-hun, a professor at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, commented: "Dropping the project will inflict a major blow on Russia's East Asia policy. The backlash from Russia will be considerable."

Seoul is also capitalising on the heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula to pass so-called anti-terrorism legislation under the pretext of countering the North Korean “threat.” Its spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS), claimed on March 8 that North Korea had hacked into the cell phones of high-ranking government officials at the end of February and beginning of March.

None of the NIS allegations should be accepted at face value. The spy agency is notorious for fabricating pretexts for ramping up pressure on North Korea. In February, Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo claimed North Korea had used 70 percent of the funds earned at the now-shuttered joint Kaesong complex to fund its weapon programs. The next day, Hong was forced to admit he had no evidence to substantiate the allegation, but the government has nevertheless continued to circulate it.

The hacking allegation came at an opportune time for Seoul. In February, the NIS, again without specific evidence, claimed North Korea was preparing cyber-attacks and demanded the passage of a cyber security bill along the lines of that currently being considered by the National Assembly. If passed, the legislation will allow the monitoring of online communication and create a new body under the NIS to direct this operation.

A separate “anti-terrorism” bill was passed last week following a nine-day filibuster by the main opposition Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK), the latest incarnation of the Democrats. The new law allows the NIS to tap telephone calls and access bank records, enabling the government to collect a broad range of information on South Korean citizens. The bill also establishes an office under the prime minister to ostensibly oversee the NIS. South Korea’s prime minister directly serves under the president.

The MPK is not opposed to the attack on democratic rights. Its filibuster is nothing more than a political stunt to give the impression that the party defends democracy in the lead-up to next month’s general election. In fact, the MPK previously suggested similar measures, as long as they were implemented by a separate government body.

The tensions with North Korea come as the US and South Korea conduct the largest-ever war games on the Korean peninsula. The Key Resolve and Foal Eagle

exercises began on March 7 and will run through to March 18 and April 30 respectively. While these drills in the past have focused on supposedly defensive scenarios, this year the two militaries are simulating offensive maneuvers under the new Operational Plan 5015 that includes pre-emptive attacks on North Korean installations and the assassination of key North Korean officials.

In short, Seoul is preparing for war alongside the US, directed not only against North Korea, but also China. Washington is exploiting the tense situation on the Korean peninsula to justify its military build-up in North East Asia as part of its broader “pivot to Asia” and military encirclement of China. Well aware that the war drive will provoke popular opposition, the South Korean government is preparing police-state measures to suppress it.



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