

US threatens harsh sanctions if North Korea conducts nuclear test

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21 April 2016

Amid speculation that a fifth North Korean nuclear test is imminent, the US has warned that the punitive sanctions currently in place would be made even tougher if Pyongyang proceeds in detonating another test device. The American threat heightens tensions on the Korean Peninsula as the US and South Korea conduct their largest-ever annual joint military exercises, designed to rehearse a war against North Korea.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye declared on Monday that signs of increased activity near North Korea's nuclear test site indicated that another test was being prepared. "We are in a situation in which we cannot predict what provocations North Korea might conduct to break away from isolation and to consolidate the regime," she said. Park ordered the South Korean military to stay on high alert.

The North Korean official media reported last month that the country's leader, Kim Jong Un, had ordered "a nuclear warhead explosion test and a test fire of several kinds of ballistic rockets able to carry nuclear warheads" within a short time. A nuclear test might be timed to coincide with a congress of the ruling Workers Party, the first since 1980, due to be held in early May.

The US already pushed harsh sanctions through the UN Security Council during March in response to a fourth North Korean nuclear test in January, followed by the launching of a long-range rocket in February. The UN measures were designed to cripple the North Korean economy, including a total ban on exports of gold, titanium ore, vanadium ore and rare earth minerals and a ban, unless for "livelihood purposes," on exports of coal, iron ore and iron, and oil sales to North Korea.

US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel told Reuters on Tuesday that any new nuclear test by North

Korea would trigger new sanctions. "Like a regime of medicine, the dosage can be upped when the effects fall short of what's required," he said. Russel suggested the US could target remittances sent by North Koreans working abroad. A South Korean study put the number of such workers, mainly employed in China and Russia, as high as 150,000 and their remittances to North Korea at \$900 million annually.

On Monday, the UN Security Council released a list of additional items related to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs banned under existing sanctions, including certain aluminium, nickel and cobalt magnets, large steel bars and tubes, frequency converters and some chemicals.

US Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken, after meeting with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Seoul on Tuesday, told the media: "If North Korea undertakes additional provocations, the existing Security Council resolution calls for additional significant measures so we would anticipate that in that event that is exactly what the international community would do."

Pointing to the US-led nuclear deal struck with Iran, Blinken indicated that the door was open to talks with North Korea, but insisted that Pyongyang had to make a "fundamental choice" to "freeze and roll back its nuclear program and allow inspectors to come in and create time and space to see if we could agree on a comprehensive agreement."

The intensifying US pressure is not primarily directed at Pyongyang, but against Beijing, as part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." North Korea's nuclear tests provide Washington with a convenient pretext for its military build-up in North East Asia, including the stationing of anti-ballistic missile systems in South Korea and Japan that are integral to the

Pentagon's preparations for war with China.

With its bellicose but empty threats, the North Korean regime plays directly into the hands of US imperialism. Its nuclear and missile tests have nothing to do with defending North Korea from attack, but rather are a desperate and futile attempt to pressure Washington to reach an accommodation. Pyongyang has been pressing for decades for a peace treaty with the US to formally conclude the 1950-53 Korean War as a means of achieving diplomatic recognition and opening up the country to foreign investment.

In testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, General Vincent Brooks, who has been nominated to lead US forces in South Korea, played up the threat posed by North Korea's limited nuclear and missile capacity. "They're struggling with getting the program up and running," he said. "Over time, I believe we're going to see them acquire these capabilities if they're not stopped."

Brooks accused China of not doing enough to rein in its North Korean ally. "The Chinese are the one country that still has economic leverage but they are reluctant to put it to full use because they don't think it'll work and they are worried about the costs."

The Chinese regime is caught in a bind, which the US is exploiting. Beijing is deeply concerned that North Korea's nuclear tests will provide a pretext to Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons. At the same time, it is worried that the unstable regime in Pyongyang could collapse under the pressure of harsh economic sanctions, opening the door for an intervention by the US and its allies.

In a sign of Beijing's nervousness, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy reported that the Chinese military has sent 2,000 troops to the border with North Korea. Some of the troops are trained to measure radioactivity in the event that North Korea carries out a nuclear test.

The current joint US-South Korean war games—Fool Eagle and Key Resolve—will only heighten fears in Pyongyang and Beijing. The drills underway are the largest ever, involving 300,000 South Korean troops and 17,000 US personnel, backed by hi-tech armoured vehicles and artillery, as well as air and sea power.

This year's exercises are based on a new joint operational plan known as OPLAN 5015, which shifts the strategy for war against North Korea from a

nominally defensive stance to an offensive one. Details leaked to the media envisage pre-emptive attacks on North Korea's nuclear and missile sites, as well as "decapitation" raids by special forces units to kill top North Korean leaders, as a prelude to the seizure of the entire Korean Peninsula.

US military firepower was on display again this week. Thousands of US and South Korean personnel, supported by helicopters, surveillance aircraft and a warship, conducted the largest ever drill to counter any North Korean military infiltration. Last Friday, the South Korean and US air forces launched their two-week Max Thunder exercise, involving more than 100 aircraft and nearly 2,000 military personnel, designed to "deter and respond" to North Korea.



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