

US and allies threaten North Korea with sanctions and military attack

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In the wake of North Korea's fifth nuclear test last Friday, the Obama administration is pressing for tough new sanctions on a regime that is already one of the most isolated in the world. Another round of punitive measures will exacerbate the already tense situation on the Korean Peninsula and heighten the danger of conflict.

US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim declared yesterday that the United States and Japan, together with South Korea, were considering unilateral sanctions in addition to any that might be imposed by the UN. Speaking in Tokyo, he said, "We will be working very closely in the [UN] Security Council and beyond to come up with the strongest possible measure against North Korea's latest actions."

North Korea, however, dismissed the threat of new sanctions as "meaningless" and "highly laughable" and called on the US to recognise it as a nuclear power. A foreign ministry statement declared it would work to improve its nuclear arsenal "in quality and in quantity," saying it needed to protect itself against US aggression.

Pyongyang's nuclear program, however, only heightens the dangers facing the working class in North Korea, throughout Asia and the world. Its bellicose threats provide the pretext for Washington to accelerate its military build-up in North East Asia, not just against North Korea, but also against China, as well as providing Japan and South Korea with a justification for further militarisation.

Speaking to the Yonhap news agency yesterday, an unnamed South Korean military official declared that the defence ministry had plans, known as "Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation," aimed at destroying Pyongyang if North Korea showed any indications of planning a nuclear attack.

"Every Pyongyang district, particularly where the

North Korean leadership is possibly hidden, will be completely destroyed by ballistic missiles and high-explosive shells as soon as the North shows any signs of using a nuclear weapon. In other words, the North's capital city will be reduced to ashes removed from the map," the source said.

This bloodcurdling threat is in line with new operational plans agreed last year between the US and South Korea, known as OPLAN 5015, providing for a pre-emptive attack on North Korea and "decapitation" operations to eliminate its top leaders, including Kim Jong-un. The US has 28,500 troops in South Korea and, in the event of war with North Korea, would assume operational command of South Korea's forces, which, including reserves, number over 3 million personnel.

Following North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January, the US pressured China to agree to the harshest UN sanctions yet, including on North Korean exports of gold, titanium ore and rare earth metals. Pyongyang is still able to buy oil and sell coal, as long as it is for "livelihood purposes," not the military. China is by far North Korea's largest trading partner, accounting for up to 90 percent of its overall trade.

China is the focus of fresh US accusations that it is not doing enough to rein in its ally and demands for tougher measures. Beijing criticised the latest nuclear test and called for North Korea to denuclearise but is reluctant to impose sanctions that would precipitate the collapse of the Pyongyang regime and result in a unified Korea allied to the US.

China is well aware that the US military build-up in North East Asia is part of broader American efforts to militarily encircle it and prepare for war. Beijing sharply criticised the US decision to install a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea that undermines China's

nuclear deterrent.

The clearest indication that the US military and intelligence apparatus is preparing more aggressive measures against North Korea was the response of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton to the nuclear test. In a pre-recorded interview last Friday with CNN after meeting with former national security officials from both Democratic and Republican administrations, she suggested that sanctions had failed and that other unspecified measures were needed. The interview was broadcast yesterday.

Clinton declared that if she took office as president, “[W]e will not allow North Korea to have a deliverable nuclear weapon.” Asked what she would do, Clinton first indicated that she would apply pressure on China to choke off trade with North Korea. “We have got to start intensifying our discussions with the Chinese, because they can’t possibly want this big problem on their doorstep,” she said.

Pressed on the issue, Clinton declared: “We’re not going to go into all the details,” then pointed to Iran as an indication of what her administration would do. “Additional sanctions and doing it the way... that I led with Iran, did have a big impact because they worked,” she said, adding: “So we will do more on sanctions [on North Korea], because that’s part of an overall strategy, but that’s not enough.”

Clinton’s reference to Iran is significant. The Obama administration’s strategy toward Tehran was a combination of economically crippling sanctions that impacted heavily on the Iranian population, and the constant threat of devastating military strikes not only against Iran’s nuclear facilities but also its military and economy. White House officials repeatedly declared that “all options are on the table”—that is, including the military one.

Clinton’s “overall strategy” toward North Korea is the same: intense economic pressure on North Korea and, if that fails to bring Pyongyang to its knees, military action that threatens to precipitate a wider war. A more sinister aspect of US measures taken against Iran—a sustained covert operation in collaboration with Israel to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists and sabotage its nuclear facilities—is undoubtedly under discussion in relation to North Korea.

John Negroponte, former director of national intelligence under US President George W. Bush,

yesterday declared that North Korea was “single most significant danger that the next administration is going to face” and something was going to have to be done about its nuclear and missile programs. Like Clinton, he suggested that “the real solution” must go further than another UN resolution or more sanctions.

The remarks of Clinton and Negroponte reflect intense discussions almost certainly taking place right now behind closed doors in the Pentagon, US intelligence agencies and the White House. While further sanctions are being publicly touted, other plans, which are far riskier and more provocative, are being drawn up and prepared that may well be implemented by the present, not the next, administration.



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