

Korean Stand-off: US Soft Power Play To Maintain Aggression Towards Iran

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Yes, the US has condemned North Korea over its alleged sinking of a South Korean warship in which 46 seamen were killed.

Yes, the US has announced that in response it will be launching naval exercises soon with its South Korean ally near the disputed coastal waters with North Korea.

And yes, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton has said during her high-profile state visit this week to China that she will be discussing the issue of North Korea with Chinese leaders, the main supporters of the Stalinist regime of Kim Jong Il.

But in light of what North Korea is accused of – an act of war – the US response is strangely and uncharacteristically subdued. Clinton, who is prone to talk about “obliterating” countries that threaten US allies, almost sounds like a voice of reason and restraint amid escalating tensions between Seoul and Pyongyang.

Following a report by South Korean investigators released on 20 May into the sinking of the Cheonan on 26 March, North Korea stands accused of one its submarine firing a fatal torpedo at the vessel. North Korea denies this and claims that the report is a fabrication. Nevertheless, the South Korean government has announced that it is cancelling all trade and investment links with its northern neighbour and is to approach the UN Security Council seeking punitive sanctions. Seoul also declared that it has put North Korea on “hair trigger alert”.

South Korea’s president Lee Myung-bak said in a televised address that Seoul would no longer tolerate “any provocative act by the North and will maintain a principle of proactive deterrence”.

Yet given the gravity of the allegations against North Korea, Clinton is reported as urging countries in the region to contain the escalation. Her own government, she said, was “working hard to avoid escalation”.

Indeed, there almost seems a surreal, relaxed attitude by the US towards Pyongyang’s political patrons in Beijing. Two days after the publication of the South Korean report into the sinking of the Cheonan, Clinton opened her visit to China by attending the Shanghai World Expo where a smiling, ebullient secretary of state handed out teddy bears to Chinese children and likened the event to “a coming out party” between the two nations. [1]

Then on 24 May at the opening of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing with

Chinese leaders – the centrepiece of Clinton’s visit – the Financial Times reports: “China and US seek to strike conciliatory note”. The two countries “sought to avoid open disagreement on North Korea, exchange rates and other big issues that divide them”. [2]

Only a few months ago, the US was waging a veritable diplomatic war against China over a raft of issues, including allegations of currency manipulation, trade protectionism and censorship of internet services provided by American firm Google.

But, tellingly, now that Washington has prima facie firm grounds to excoriate Beijing over an alleged act of war by one of its clients against a US ally, America’s usually tough-talking chief diplomat, Hillary Clinton, is handing out cuddly toys to her hosts and pointedly seeking conciliation.

Although, perhaps Clinton gave the game away when she told reporters in China, ahead of the summit in Beijing, that in addition to the topics of bilateral economic ties and North Korea she will discussing with Chinese leaders the matter of Iran.

From the US perspective, China has been the main stumbling block in Washington’s relentless campaign over the past four years to strangle Iran with ever-tightening UN sanctions. Ever since Clinton let it be known in a speech to the America Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington at the end of last March [3] that the US had to “work on China” to get it on board to support a fourth round of UN sanctions, there has been an assiduous effort by the US to entice China. Such diplomatic work evidently involved a change of tack from the hitherto aggressive US policy to one of a softer approach. Such a change of tack seemed to pay off when the US announced on 18 May that its draft resolution for further UN sanctions on Iran had the support of all members of the Security Council, including China, its long-sought after prize.

Gone is the strident rhetoric about currency and trade manipulation, and now even after what appears to be a deadly act of aggression by China’s North Korean ally, Washington is decidedly restrained.

The key to understanding US contradictions over its reaction to the latest tensions on the Korean Peninsula is Iran. Above all else, it seems, Washington wants to maintain a consensus among the Security Council to vote for a fourth round of sanctions against Iran in the coming weeks. Crucially, this will depend on the US keeping China sweet.

The strenuous US power play to isolate Tehran is given all the more urgency – from a US perspective – following the recent (17 May) nuclear fuel swap deal declared by Iran, Turkey and Brazil. The declaration is currently before the International Atomic Energy Agency for approval and has been hailed by many world leaders, including UN chief Ban Ki-moon, as a “positive step” towards peacefully resolving the long-running nuclear dispute between the US, its western allies, and Iran.

The tripartite Iranian declaration poses a potentially fatal blow to the US strategy of isolating Tehran, a strategy that has nothing to do with Iran’s alleged nuclear ambitions and everything to do with Washington’s deep desire for “regime change” – to bring the Islamic Republic back under US geopolitical control. The independence of Iran from western geopolitical imperatives in a vital energy region is what is at stake, not alleged nuclear ambitions.

A measure of how determined the US is in its need to subjugate the Iranian government can be seen from its curious, cuddly bear diplomacy over conflict in Korean Peninsula. An apparent act of war by a nuclear armed state is being cynically downplayed by the US simply because it needs China to effect further aggression towards Iran – a state which has neither nuclear weapons nor at war with anyone.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE64L0X020100522>

[2] <http://link.ft.com/r/OZMCDD/EW9600/DK560/ZB7SL0/TPT6RJ/ID/h>

[3] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18297>

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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