

The Risk of War: South Korea's Threats Heighten Danger of Military Conflict

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye yesterday gave her country's military the green light to take any action that it saw fit in response to a threat from North Korea. Her comments escalate the danger of conflict on the Korean Peninsula amid ongoing joint war games between South Korea and the US, and warnings of war by North Korea.

Park, the daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee, told a defence ministry policy briefing that she regarded North Korea's threats as "very serious". She added: "If the North attempts any provocation against our people and country, you must respond strongly at the first contact with them, without political consideration."

While Washington and Seoul portray their stance as purely defensive, the Yonhap News Agency reported that the South Korean military had unveiled a new contingency plan of "active deterrence" at yesterday's briefing. The plan would allow the military "to launch a pre-emptive strike against North Korea if the North shows signs of an imminent nuclear or missile attack on the South," Yonhap explained.

A presidential spokesman told Yonhap that Park had emphasised the need for "strong preparedness" in a special video call to the commander of the South Korean navy's second fleet, which is based in the Yellow Sea, where disputed maritime boundaries have led to clashes in the past.

The US is intimately involved in these military preparations against North Korea. During the briefing session, the South Korean defence ministry reported that the drafting of a joint "tailored deterrence strategy" with the US was well underway and would be finalised by October.

Park won the December presidential election in South Korea, promising to hold dialogue with North Korea. Far from easing tensions, she has set the stage for a provocation by the South Korean military that could be followed by a rapid escalation of conflict. Park's Saenuri Party, previously named the Grand National Party, was the political organisation of the US-backed military dictatorship, which only relinquished power in the late 1980s.

Park's aggressive stance toward North Korea followed media criticisms of her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, also from the Saenuri Party, for failing to take tougher military action against North Korea during the tense confrontation in December 2010 that involved artillery exchanges centred on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island.

The tense situation on the Korean Peninsula has rapidly escalated since the US, with China's

backing, imposed a new round of UN sanctions on North Korea over its nuclear test last month. North Korea has abrogated the Armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953, cut off hotlines to South Korea and threatened to defend itself by attacking the US and South Korea, including with nuclear weapons. On Saturday, Pyongyang declared that a “state of war” existed with Seoul.

At the same time, however, North Korea has, despite a warning to the contrary, kept open the Kaesong Industrial Zone used by South Korean companies to access cheap North Korean labour. The industrial zone is one of the country’s few sources of foreign exchange.

The Obama administration has exploited Pyongyang’s bellicose rhetoric to further build up the US military presence in the Asia Pacific, including a 50 percent increase in its anti-ballistic missile interceptors and a trial run by nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers from the US and South Korea. While nominally directed at North Korea, the US push is primarily aimed against China as part of Obama’s so-called “pivot to Asia”—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and strategic plan to contain China and undermine its influence throughout the region.

The rising American pressure on Beijing has provoked an unusually public debate in Chinese ruling circles over its alliance with North Korea. Some prominent Chinese academics have declared that North Korea is a liability and called for a loosening or even cutting of ties. Military figures, however, have insisted that China has to stand by its ally, as instability in North Korea or the collapse of the regime would only weaken China’s strategic position.

According to the *Washington Free Beacon*, China has placed its military forces on heightened alert in the region adjacent to the Korean peninsula. Citing American officials, the right-wing US newspaper reported that the Chinese military was extending its naval drills in the Yellow Sea and mobilising troops and aircraft. Whether it contains an element of truth or not, the article points to the climate of fear and panic being cultivated by the US media to justify the US military buildup in North East Asia.

The US is currently engaged in extensive joint military exercises with South Korea that began on March 1 and involve US warplanes and warships as well as troops. The Pentagon has not only publicly highlighted the B-2 flights, but also the involvement of nuclear-capable B-52 bombers and the deployment of two advanced fighter jets, F-22 Raptors, from their base in Japan. Yesterday the US navy announced that it had sent the USS Fitzgerald, a hi-tech destroyer equipped with the Aegis anti-missile system, to waters off the Korean peninsula.

Pentagon spokesman George Little insisted that the exercises simply sought to reassure US allies, Japan and South Korea, against the threat posed by North Korea. He urged North Korea to “switch lanes” and “seek peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.” To do so, however, required that Pyongyang “come into compliance with their international obligations,” he added.

Washington’s posturing as a voice of peace in North East Asia is entirely hypocritical. Over the past two decades, North Korea has repeatedly signed up to deals over its nuclear program, either directly with the US, or indirectly via the so-called six-party talks sponsored by China, only to be left with broken promises. Obama, following on from George W. Bush, made no effort to restart six-party negotiations and has used rocket firings and nuclear tests to intensify pressure on Pyongyang.

When Little declared that North Korea must meet its “international obligations”, he simply meant that Pyongyang must give up its nuclear and missile programs—the only bargaining chips that the small, economically backward country has—in advance of any negotiations. The North Korean regime has indicated its willingness to transform into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors, but the US economic blockade, in place since the end of the Korean War, effectively stymies any such attempt.

Just as Obama’s “pivot to Asia” has encouraged allies such as Japan and the Philippines to take a tougher stance in their maritime disputes with China, so it has also dangerously inflamed the Korean Peninsula and heightened the danger of war.

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