

US Escalates Campaign against North Korea

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The Obama administration ratcheted up the pressure Friday on the isolated Stalinist regime in North Korea, with the FBI formally accusing North Korea of responsibility for the hacking attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment and Obama declaring that the US government would carry out an unspecified “proportionate response” against Pyongyang at “a time and place of our own choosing.”

Obama made no mention of the cyberattack or North Korea’s alleged responsibility in his opening statement at his end-of-the-year White House press conference, waiting until a suitable question was posed by the media to raise the issue.

The FBI offered no proof of a North Korean link to the hacking attack on Sony, which led to the studio’s cancellation of the planned December 25 release of the Seth Rogen film *The Interview*, a comedy whose premise is that two American journalists are contracted by the CIA to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The FBI statement claimed several similarities between computer code used in the malware deployed against Sony and that used in previous attacks linked to North Korea, but these claims are unsubstantiated and computer security experts interviewed in the press have cast doubt on whether any definitive links can be established.

The American public is asked to take on faith the FBI’s declaration that it “now has enough information to conclude that the North Korean government is responsible for these actions.” The statement continued: “North Korea’s actions were intended to inflict significant harm on a US business and suppress the right of American citizens to express themselves.”

Such language is ironic coming from a federal agency that plays a central role in the build-up of a police state apparatus in America. A recent report in the *Wall Street Journal*, citing figures from the National Center for State Courts, found that the FBI has accumulated criminal record files on 80 million Americans—more than one-third of the adult population.

Obama likewise provided no evidence of North Korean involvement, merely citing the FBI statement as authoritative. He criticized Sony Pictures for withdrawing *The Interview* from circulation in response to threats from the hackers, who called themselves “Guardians of Peace.”

“We cannot have a society where some dictator someplace can start imposing censorship here in the United States,” Obama said, “because if somebody is able to intimidate folks out of releasing a satirical movie, imagine what they’ll do when they see a documentary that they don’t like, or news reports that they don’t like.”

He continued, "That's not what America's about. Again, I'm sympathetic that Sony as a private company was worried about liabilities and this and that and the other. I wish they'd spoken to me first. I would have told them, do not get into a pattern in which you're intimidated by these kinds of criminal attacks."

This pretense of alarm over the threat to the civil liberties of Americans is just as hypocritical coming from Obama as from the FBI. His administration has prosecuted more whistleblowers for leaking information about government crimes to the press than any other in American history. Obama has presided over dragnet surveillance of the telecommunications and email of every American by the National Security Agency, trampling on the Bill of Rights. And he has asserted the unprecedented "right" of the president to order the drone missile assassination of anyone in the world, including American citizens.

As for censorship, this is a government that doesn't hesitate to demand that major newspapers and television networks withhold information from the public, including information on massive violations of the Constitution by the government itself, in the name of "national security." The media routinely complies, allowing the government to vet and/or censor articles and news reports before they are aired.

The latest charges against North Korea have provided yet another example of the American press corps' readiness to function as a de facto sounding board for state propaganda. There has been no pretense of critical independence in the vast bulk of reporting on the hacking attack on Sony and the alleged responsibility of the North Korean regime, which has denied any involvement. The government's claims are simply reported as facts, whether by the television networks and cable channels or newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

The government's record of lying, whether on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, NSA spying, or, more recently, CIA torture, is simply ignored.

The daily newspapers and television networks have largely dropped any reporting on last week's Senate Intelligence Committee report documenting systematic torture by the CIA of prisoners held in secret prisons overseas. Not a single question was raised about the torture report at Obama's hour-long press conference.

Obama made it clear that the US government would retaliate against North Korea for the alleged hacking attack on Sony. "They caused a lot of damage, and we will respond," he said. "We will respond proportionally, and we'll respond in a place and time and manner that we choose."

While the tone was matter-of-fact, Obama refused to rule out military action in response to a follow-up question by a reporter, saying only that he would not expand on his previous statement about an indeterminate future response.

White House, Pentagon and intelligence officials were holding daily meetings on North Korea, an Obama spokesman said. Before the FBI issued its finding, Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he was "very concerned" about the US potentially concluding that a nation-state was behind the attack. "When and if that call is made, it will be a moment to confront that reality" of a state-supported cyberattack on a US corporation, Dempsey said.

The US military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region continues apace. Obama has just signed the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act, which provides for expanded efforts to establish a joint missile defense system in northeast Asia, involving South Korea and Japan. This would be directed against North Korea in the first instance, but ultimately against China, the main US target in the region.

On Thursday, Obama approved the sale of four US frigates to Taiwan, under the Naval Vessel Transfer Act, over the vociferous opposition of Beijing. The sale of the guided-missile frigates “blatantly interferes in China’s domestic affairs and undermines China’s sovereignty and security interests,” a Chinese defense ministry spokesman said.

While Obama said the FBI had not linked the Sony attack to any nation other than North Korea, other US officials pointed out that North Korea’s only connection to the World Wide Web is through China, an indication that further escalation of the Sony affair could involve charging China with at least a supporting role.

Meanwhile, evidence continues to surface that the entire Sony Pictures affair, going back to the original decision by the studio to make a film depicting the murder of Kim Jong-un, was a provocation inspired by the US military-intelligence apparatus.

Email communications obtained by the online publication *Daily Beast* and cited in many columns and commentaries Friday strongly suggest this. Sony Pictures co-chairman Michael Lynton is on the board of trustees of the Rand Corporation, a leading private consulting firm for the CIA and Pentagon, and it was Rand’s North Korea specialist, Bruce Bennett, who pushed hard for the Sony film to focus on the assassination of North Korea’s ruler.

According to one of these emails, Seth Rogen, the film’s co-director, had initially intended the film to target an unnamed leader of an unnamed country, and it was Lynton himself “that told them to not use a fictitious name, but to go with Kim Jong-un.” The same message, written by Marisa Liston, a Sony senior vice president, said that Rogen and co-director Evan Goldberg “mention that a former CIA agent and someone who used to work for Hillary Clinton looked at the script.”

An email from Bennett, the Rand analyst, to Lynton suggested that the film could actually help unseat the North Korean regime. “I have been clear that the assassination of Kim Jong Un is the most likely path to a collapse of the North Korean government,” Bennett wrote. “I believe that a story that talks about the removal of the Kim family regime and the creation of a new government by the North Korean people (well, at least the elites) will start some real thinking in South Korea and, I believe, in the North once the DVD leaks into the North (which it almost certainly will).”

Lynton responded, “Bruce—Spoke to someone very senior in State (confidentially). He agreed with everything you have been saying. Everything. I will fill you in when we speak.”

Other emails name two State Department officials—Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel and Ambassador Robert King, US special envoy for North Korea human-rights issues—as providing input to the film.

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