

US Exploits Korean Clash to Step Up Pressure on China

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The Obama administration has moved to exploit the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, heightened by Tuesday's exchange of artillery shelling between the two Koreas, to exert increased pressure on China, Washington's emerging rival for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.

Tuesday's death toll on the South Korean side has risen to four, following the discovery of the bodies of two construction workers on the island of Yeonpyeong. Two South Korean soldiers were also killed by a North Korean artillery barrage. The extent of damage in North Korea, after the South Korean military reportedly "returned fire" with 80 rounds of shells, remains unclear. Asian and international share markets tumbled on Wednesday, reflecting fears of further military clashes and the possible involvement of the major powers.

Far from acting to reduce tensions, the Obama administration decided on Wednesday to send the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, and five other warships, to the Yellow Sea to hold joint exercises with South Korea. The New York Times reported yesterday that while the US participation in the exercises was planned in July, "the presidents of both nations set the specific date [November 28-December 1] in response to the artillery attack by North Korea."

In July, China strongly objected to any deployment of the USS George Washington in the Yellow Sea, which lies between China and Korea, as a national security threat. China held major military exercises of its own in the area to underscore Beijing's extreme sensitivity. While that proposed naval drill between the US and South Korea was then shifted to the Sea of Japan, the Obama administration repeatedly insisted it would eventually deploy the aircraft carrier to the Yellow Sea. The timing of the carrier fleet's proposed deployment, amid the acute tensions between the two Koreas, is therefore particularly provocative.

According to media reports, many ordinary people in South Korea fear there could be a full-scale war. Kim Mi-sook, whose son is in the first year of military service, told the Korea Herald: "I began panicking the moment I heard of the breaking news. Any small signs of provocation or armed actions by the North would be enough to excite anxiety in a soldier's mother, and what's worse, today's situation seems to be more warlike than ever."

Residents in Incheon, on the west coast of South Korea, near where the latest shelling took place, had their fears exacerbated by the high alert declared by the government, which closed harbours and restricted civilian and traffic movements. Hundreds of Yeonpyeong island residents arrived in Incheon as refugees. Jeon Seung-wook, a local resident said: "I fear that the situation may expand and get worse."

President Obama told ABC News on Tuesday that the US was firmly committed to militarily back South Korea. He pointedly described the two countries' alliance as "a cornerstone of US security in the Pacific region". Obama also branded the North Korea as "a serious and ongoing threat that needs to be dealt with". The US president phoned South Korean President Lee Myung-bak last night to reaffirm Washington's commitment to the military alliance.

With this strong US backing, Lee's Grand National Party (GNP) government is taking a hard-line stance, threatening military retaliation in the event of future North Korean attacks. The GNP is the party of the former South Korean military dictatorship that was propped up by the US during the Cold War.

North Korea has insisted that its shelling was a counterattack. It accused forces involved in South Korea's large-scale "Hoguk" military exercise in the Yellow Sea of firing shells into North Korea's territorial waters.

North Korea has never accepted the Northern Limited Line dividing the territorial waters in the Yellow Sea. The line was imposed by the US-led forces after the Korean War ended in 1953. In 1999, North Korea declared its own demarcation of the disputed waters, leading to two deadly clashes. At least 17 North Korean sailors were killed during one naval fire fight. In 2002, four South Koreans and about 30 North Koreans died in another skirmish. Fighting also occurred in November 2009, when South Korean ships severely damaged a North Korean boat, just on the eve of Obama's first visit to Asia.

Earlier this year, the US seized upon the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in March in the same disputed waters, even though North Korea denied any role in the incident. Despite being shifted from the Sea of Japan, July's US-South Korean joint naval exercises were aimed at North Korea from the Sea of Japan.

Now the US administration is escalating the pressure on China. On Tuesday, Obama called on China to tell North Korea "that there are a set of international rules they need to abide by". State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley declared yesterday: "China does have influence with North Korea and we would hope and expect China would use that influence."

For China to "influence" North Korea would mean moving to cut off aid to its already impoverished ally and force it to meet US demands. Pyongyang has suffered from decades of sanctions by the US and its allies. China is North Korea's largest aid provider and investor, and is actively seeking to open up the country for Chinese companies to use as a cheap labour platform.

Sections of the US media have called on the White House to accuse Beijing of being culpable for North Korea's "provocations". A Washington Post editorial on Tuesday declared: "The United States and its allies should hold Beijing responsible for putting a stop to Mr. Kim's [North Korean leader] dangerous behaviour."

John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN under the George W. Bush administration, told the USA Today: "The threat from North Korea is not going to end until North Korea ends." He declared: "It's matter of squeezing them, isolating them completely". Bolton asserted that China "has the unique capability of determining events in North Korea".

Concerns that an "overreaction" by the US could trigger a wider conflict with China led

former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to write in the Financial Times on Tuesday: "Critically, however, our approach to China should not be adversarial. It is not in America's nor China's interest to create massive popular hostility... A call from Mr. Obama to Mr. Hu should be a call between leaders who share a concern. It should not be an American demand, nor an admonition."

While the White House confirmed today that Obama would call Chinese President Hu Jintao in the next few days, Obama's decision to send the USS George Washington to the Yellow Sea indicates that the White House is taking a course that could lead to confrontation with China.

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