

US Threatens North Korea while Signaling Possible Talks

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Fears of war remained high on the Korean peninsula, amid continuing military exercises by both the United States and North Korea, after revelations Thursday that the crisis was following a “playbook” of US escalations prepared months ago by the Obama administration.

Yesterday, Washington released pictures of American F-22 stealth fighters participating in the ongoing “Foal Eagle” US-South Korean military exercises. In recent weeks, it has sent guided missile warships and flown nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 heavy bombers to Korea, claiming this was intended to prove US “nuclear deterrence” capabilities.

Citing intercepted communications and satellite imagery, US officials said that the North Korean regime in Pyongyang was preparing to launch a medium-range Musudan missile from its eastern coast. South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin told the parliament in Seoul that signaled an imminent “military drill.”

US officials told CNN that they also believed the missile launch was a test, and not preparation to launch an attack at targets in the United States or US-allied states like Japan or South Korea. The Musudan missile reportedly has a range of 2,500 miles, meaning that it can reach as far as Japan, but cannot hit Hawaii, let alone the mainland United States.

Nonetheless, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel stressed that North Korean threats to Guam, Hawaii, and the US mainland had to be taken “seriously.”

In a column titled “No, North Korea can’t hit Hawaii,” James Hardy—the Asia-Pacific editor for *Jane’s Defense Weekly*—effectively rebutted Hagel’s claims. Hardy wrote, “Unless there has been a miraculous turnaround among North Korea’s strategic forces, there is little to no chance that it could successfully land a missile on Guam, Hawaii, or anywhere else outside the Korean Peninsula that US forces may be stationed.”

Commenting on North Korea’s missile program, Hardy noted the likelihood that Washington “is using its existence as an excuse to ramp up their Asia-Pacific-facing missile defenses.” He noted that this would “tie into Washington’s ‘pivot’ plans for the Asia-Pacific, but would not be lost on China, which has already signaled its lack of enthusiasm for any such moves.”

The official account, parroted by the Western media, which presents US actions as a response to threatened attack from Pyongyang, is fraudulent. In reality, the North Korean regime—isolated, spied upon, vastly outclassed militarily by the US and its allies and dependent on China for key food and fuel supplies—faces a relentless campaign of escalation led by Washington.

While this poses a very real risk of a clash along the highly-militarized North Korean-South Korean border, escalating into a confrontation between the US and China, Pyongyang is hardly capable of directly threatening the United States. Rather, Washington is using this crisis to whip Pyongyang and the Chinese regime in Beijing into line.

China has emerged as the most powerful country blocking US imperialism's global plans, holding massive US debt and blocking UN actions aimed at justifying war against Syria and Iran. Since the Korean War, a keystone of its foreign policy has been using North Korea as a buffer between US-backed South Korea and its own territory. In pressing the newly-installed, divided Chinese Communist Party leadership on the North Korean issue, Washington hopes to broadly turn around Chinese foreign policy in its favor.

Beijing is reportedly enforcing at least some UN sanctions it helped pass last month against Pyongyang, thus intensifying the crisis of the North Korean regime.

US National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden called on Pyongyang "to heed President Obama's call to choose the path of peace and come into compliance with its international obligations. Threats and provocations will not bring North Korea the security, international respect, and economic development it seeks."

In comments to CNN yesterday, anonymous US Defense Department officials made clear that, while they were maintaining military pressure on Pyongyang, they also aimed to create more advantageous conditions for negotiations.

One official said, "We are trying to turn the volume down." According to CNN, this change "referred to public statements by the Obama administration, instead of how US military hardware was being deployed in the region." That is, aggressive deployments of US bombers and warships amid the two-month-long Foal Eagle military exercises would continue.

However, the official explained, "We are absolutely trying to ratchet back the rhetoric. We became part of the cycle. We allowed that to happen."

After effectively admitting that Washington's military gestures had ratcheted up the tensions in Korea, US officials absurdly implied that this was not a deliberate policy and that they had been surprised by the outcome. Citing its defense sources, CNN wrote that "some Pentagon officials were surprised at how US news releases and statements on North Korea were generating world headlines and therefore provoking a Pyongyang response."

Another US defense official said, "We accused the North Koreans of amping things up, now we are worried that we did the same thing."

These claims are simply not credible. Washington has been deploying heavy bombers and other high-tech forces to Korea, announcing that they were aimed at proving US nuclear capabilities, implicitly threatening nuclear war that could annihilate North Korea and involve the US in a war with China. It was obvious that this would massively escalate military tensions in Asia and "generate world headlines."

Yesterday, North Korea warned select foreign embassies in Pyongyang that it could not guarantee their safety in the event of war, suggesting they consider evacuation. The Russian and British embassies decided not to evacuate their staff, however.

In a statement broadcast Thursday by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency, the North Korean People's Army (KPA) said, "No one can say whether a war will break out or not and whether it will break out today or tomorrow. The responsibility for this grave situation rests entirely with the US administration and military warmongers keen to encroach upon the DPRK's sovereignty and bring down its dignified social system with brigandish logic."

In fact, the reactionary Pyongyang bureaucracy would be eager to re-establish ties based on exploiting the cheap labor of North Korean workers to build up an export industry. However, it has not been able to negotiate an agreement with all the major powers on how to carry out such a shift in policy, given the explosive geo-strategic conflicts in the region. Moreover, there are fears in sections of the regime, notably the army, that the abandonment of Pyongyang's current *Songun* "military-first" policy would come at their expense.

It appears that the US escalation was in part also aimed at showing South Korea and Japan that Washington remains committed to exercising military hegemony in Asia. One US military official told CNN, "Eyebrows started to go up when it was clear that Foal Eagle was going to be protected from the budget cuts of sequestration"—a series of US government spending cuts that went into effect in March.

That is, while trillions of dollars in long-term cuts were being forced on American workers, causing mass furloughs and cuts in essential social services, Washington was careful to maintain its ability to wage a devastating war in Asia.

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