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US, South Korea discuss deploying “strategic weapons”

By Ben McGrath

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Following North Korea’s fourth nuclear test on Wednesday, the US and South Korea are reportedly discussing, at the highest levels, the deployment of “strategic assets” to the Korean Peninsula. The stationing of nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems would be a major escalation of the US military build-up in Asia, which is directed primarily against China, not North Korea.

There is nothing progressive about North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons. It is a desperate and reckless attempt by a police-state regime mired in nationalism and xenophobia to deflect acute economic and social tensions at home outward. Far from defending North Korea against imperialism, Pyongyang’s small, rudimentary nuclear arsenal and accompanying saber-rattling only serve to divide the working class in Asia and provide the US and allies with a pretext to accelerate their war plans and provocations.

Washington moved swiftly following Pyongyang’s test. Yesterday, a South Korean Defense Ministry official was quoted by the country’s largest news agency, Yonhap, saying: “Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Lee Sun-jin and U.S. Forces Korea commander Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti held a face-to-face meeting in the afternoon yesterday and discussed the deployment of U.S. strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula.”

According to the news agency, this could include nuclear submarines, nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers, as well as F-22 stealth fighters, designed for air-to-air combat. “Specifics, including when the strategic assets will come here, have not been concluded yet,” the official added, while saying that “various ideas are under review.”

As well as the top-level military meeting, US President Barack Obama spoke to President Park Geun-hye of South Korea, reportedly to discuss options, followed by a meeting yesterday between US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-koo.

According to Voice of America, Carter and Han “discussed response measures the Korea-U.S. military alliance is considering, in addition to continued joint exercises.” Han said Carter “reaffirmed the US’s ironclad defense commitment to South Korea, and this includes all kinds of extended deterrence assets.”

While refusing to provide any details, Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook yesterday told a media briefing: “We are confident that we, working in lock step with the South Koreans, can respond appropriately to this action and continue to review all options that need to be considered at this point.”

Voice of America also reported that the US and South Korea had ordered their military forces on the Korean Peninsula on “high alert.” Almost 25,000 US troops are in South Korea, according to Defense Department data, plus about 3,200 Defense Department civilian employees.

While ostensibly directed against North Korea, these measures cannot be explained as a reaction to that regime’s primitive efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, any use of which would be suicidal, given Washington’s immense nuclear arsenal.

Rather than the supposed “rogue state” in Pyongyang, the real global aggressor is the United States, which has been engaged in predatory military interventions for decades, and the primary target of the current moves is China, which is being increasingly encircled militarily and strategically by the US “pivot to Asia.”

US Secretary of State John Kerry immediately ratcheted up the pressure on China yesterday, following a call to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Making a rare appearance in the State Department press room after the call, Kerry demanded that China take action to deal with North Korea, its formal ally.

Sweeping aside China’s condemnation of the nuclear test, and its previous attempts to secure an agreement with Pyongyang to halt such tests, Kerry declared: “China had a particular approach that it wanted to make, that we agreed and respect to give them space to implement that. Today in my conversation with the Chinese I made it clear that has not worked and we cannot continue business as usual.”

Washington took provocative steps following Pyongyang’s third nuclear test in February 2013, sending nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 strategic bombers to the peninsula in a show of force directed against China. The US also used that test to announce the expansion of its ground-based

anti-ballistic missile interceptors by 50 percent in the Asia Pacific region by 2017, a move already prepared before the North's test.

The US is likely to continue extending its anti-ballistic missile system, which is not for defense, but to ensure that it can block any Chinese or Russian counterattack in the event Washington launched a nuclear strike at either one. This includes pressuring Seoul to accept the placement of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea, a step strongly opposed by China.

For decades, the US stationed tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, officially removing them in 1991. The introduction of strategic weapons—designed to hit longer-range targets—would sharply escalate the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" to a new and dangerous level with the potential to ignite a nuclear arms race in North East Asia.

Floor leader of South Korea's ruling Saenuri Party Won Yu-cheol said Thursday: "It is time for us to peacefully arm ourselves with nukes from the perspective of self-defense to fight against North Korea's terror and destruction." In the past, other South Korean lawmakers have called for the return of US tactical nuclear weapons as well as the construction of their own nuclear bombs.

The Federation of American Scientists stated in a report last April that Seoul could produce dozens of bombs in a short period of time. South Korea's reactor in Wolsong, North Gyeongsang Province is capable of producing enough plutonium to make 416 bombs per year. South Korea was working toward constructing its own nuclear weapons in the 1970s but shut down the program under US pressure, and agreed to a treaty that prevented Seoul from reprocessing or enriching nuclear material.

Similarly, Japan could obtain its own nuclear weapons within six months, possessing the nuclear material and the means to do so. Tokyo has large stockpiles of plutonium and uranium. Its Rokkasho reprocessing plant could produce enough weapons-grade plutonium for 2,000 bombs annually.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called North Korea's test "a grave threat to the safety of our country." This statement is significant in light of this past summer's passage of military legislation that substantially lifted restraints on the Japanese military. Nuclear weapons or not, Japan is also likely to use Pyongyang's test to justify its own continuing remilitarization.

Japan and South Korea have also quickly agreed to work together to adopt a United Nations resolution escalating the crippling sanctions imposed on North Korea. Despite ongoing differences over Japan's occupation of Korea from 1910 until the end of World War II, the close cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo is likely to intensify at the urging of the Washington.

The North Korean nuclear test and Washington's militarist response are a further sharp warning of the highly inflammable situation in Asia and internationally being generated by the deepening crisis of global capitalism and rising geo-political antagonisms. An accident or miscalculation on the Korean Peninsula, or in any number of volatile flashpoints around the world, has the potential to trigger a devastating conflagration.

