

BREAKING NEWS: US intensifies pressure on North Korea after rocket launch

By [Peter Symonds](#)

Global Research, April 14, 2012

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 14 April 2012

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The Obama administration condemned North Korea's attempted launch yesterday of a three-stage rocket and suspended the provision of 240,000 tonnes of food aid under an agreement reached with Pyongyang on February 29.

Despite pressure from the US and its allies, North Korea proceeded with the launch, insisting it was putting a small satellite into orbit. Under the February deal, Pyongyang had agreed to suspend nuclear weapons testing and to allow inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to return to the country.

In the event, the rocket, which was closely monitored by the US, Japan and South Korea, broke up less than two minutes after liftoff. The debris fell safely into the Yellow Sea, some 100 kilometres off the South Korean coast. North Korean authorities acknowledged that the satellite had failed to reach its orbit.

The launch coincided with the 100th anniversary on Sunday of the birth of Kim Il-sung, who was the first leader of the Stalinist regime established in the wake of World War II and the Cold War division of the Korean Peninsula. The celebrations were designed to cement the position of his grandson, Kim Jong-un, who has been installed as North Korea's top leader following the death of his father Kim Jong-il in December.

The American and international media is preoccupied with the potential impact of the unsuccessful launch on the internal politics of the Pyongyang regime. Far more significant, however, is the manner in which the Obama administration has exploited the issue to intensify its pressure on North Korea, as part of its broader efforts to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia.

Despite the rocket failure, White House spokesperson Jay Carney branded North Korea's "provocative action" as a threat to regional security and a breach of international law. In fact, North Korea had gone to some lengths to demonstrate that it was not conducting a missile test, inviting around 50 foreign journalists to the launch site.

At Washington's instigation, the UN Security Council met in emergency session yesterday and issued a statement that "deplored" the launch as a breach of punitive UN resolutions imposed after previous rocket firings in 2006 and 2009. American ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, who is currently Security Council president, indicated that further measures against Pyongyang were under discussion. "We think a credible reaction is important," she said.

At a G8 foreign ministers summit on Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned:

“Pyongyang has a clear choice: It can pursue peace and reap the benefits of closer ties with the international community, including the United States; or it can continue to face pressure and isolation.”

Tensions are set to intensify amid leaked claims by South Korean authorities that North Korea is preparing for another nuclear test.

The chief target of Washington’s campaign is not Pyongyang, but Beijing. The dismal failure of the rocket launch underscores the fact that North Korea poses no real danger to the US or its allies. Yet Washington continues to inflate the threat as a means of putting pressure on China.

Speaking in South Korea last month, President Obama accused China of not doing enough to bring its North Korean ally into line with US demands. “What I have said to them [the Chinese] consistently is rewarding bad behaviour, turning a blind eye to deliberate provocations... that’s obviously not working.”

The Chinese regime is well aware that the US is exploiting North Korea’s rocket launches and nuclear weapons tests to maintain tensions in North East Asia and justify the continued presence of American military bases in Japan and South Korea. While attempting to push Pyongyang to moderate its actions, Beijing wants to avoid a political and economic crisis in impoverished North Korea that would destabilise the region.

Beijing brokered six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia in a bid to defuse tensions over North Korea’s nuclear program. China’s UN ambassador Li Baodong declared this week: “We think the peace and stability of the region is really important. We have got to do everything possible to defuse tension rather than inflame the situation there.”

Provocatively, both Japan and South Korea announced intentions to shoot down the missile or any of its parts that entered their airspace. The Japanese military deployed land-based PAC-3 interceptor missiles to locations in Tokyo and the Okinawa, Ishigaki and Miyako islands, and sent three Aegis-equipped destroyers to the East China Sea.

It is highly unlikely that South Korea and Japan would have activated their “missile shields” without a green light from the Obama administration. If either country had shot down the North Korean missile, tensions in North East Asia would have escalated dramatically. By branding North Korea as a “rogue state,” the US has a convenient pretext for the development of anti-ballistic missile systems with South Korea, Japan and Australia.

In late March, US assistant defence secretary for global strategic affairs, Madelyn Creedon, reiterated the Pentagon’s plans for such missile systems in the Middle East and Asia, in concert with its regional allies. The “missile shields” in Asia are not aimed against North Korea, which is yet to test a successful long-range missile, but against China’s nuclear arsenal.

In response to Creedon’s statements, an editorial in China’s hard-line *Global Times* called for China to “upgrade its nuclear weapon capability due to the possible threats posed by the US system. Specifically, China can improve its nuclear weapons in quantity and quality as well as develop offensive nuclear-powered submarines. China’s ballistic missiles should be able to break the interception capability of the US system.”

While the Obama administration routinely blames North Korea for “provocative actions” and “bad behaviour,” the chief responsibility for heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in North East Asia rests with Washington.

In 2001, the Bush administration effectively tore up the so-called Agreed Framework reached by President Bill Clinton with Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear facilities in return for two power reactors, other aid and the normalisation of relations. As the confrontation worsened, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled IAEA inspectors and in 2006 and 2009 conducted two nuclear tests. A deal brokered through the six-party talks broke down in late 2008, with Pyongyang accusing Washington of changing its terms.

The Obama administration maintained Bush’s hard-line stance toward North Korea and encouraged South Korea to do the same. Following artillery exchanges between the two Koreas in November 2010 involving South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island, the US conducted a series of provocative joint naval exercises with South Korea in waters that are strategically sensitive for both North Korea and China.

The Obama administration’s confrontational approach in North East Asia is part of its broader “pivot” to Asia: the strengthening of US alliances and strategic ties throughout the region, a build-up of US military capacity in South East Asia and Australia, and an aggressive diplomatic intervention into sensitive issues such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

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