

Pentagon ratchets up Korea tensions over nuclear facility

By Bill Van Auken
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An American nuclear scientist's report on North Korea's development of a new uranium enrichment plant has provoked dire warnings from top US military and political officials.

In a report posted online over the weekend, Siegfried Hecker, the former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, said that during a visit to North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex last week, he was taken on an inspection tour of both a new experimental light-water nuclear reactor and another facility that contained "more than 1,000 centrifuges" that the North Koreans said were already being used to process low-enriched uranium to provide fuel for the reactor.

Hecker described the facility as "stunning." He wrote in his report, "Instead of seeing a few small cascades of centrifuges, which I believed to exist in North Korea, we saw a modern, clean centrifuge plant of more than a thousand centrifuges all neatly aligned and plumbed below us." He said the facility was "astonishingly modern," adding that "it would fit into any modern American processing facility."

Referring to the North Koreans' insistence that the facility was meant to fuel the light-water reactor—sanctions have prevented North Korea from importing nuclear technology and fuel—the US scientist wrote: "It is possible that Pyongyang's latest moves are directed primarily at eventually generating much-needed electricity. Yet, the military potential of uranium enrichment technology is serious."

While low-enriched nuclear fuel is designed for use in power stations, such a facility could be reconfigured to produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons.

The report provoked a sharp reaction from Washington and the ratcheting up of already elevated tensions in the region.

Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued the most bellicose response in a series of statements made on morning news talk shows on Sunday.

"It confirms or validates the concern we've had for years

about their enriching uranium, which they've denied routinely," Mullen said. "They are a country that routinely we are unable to believe that they would do what they say."

Speaking on ABC, the US military commander said, "The assumption certainly is, that they continue to head in the direction of additional nuclear weapons. And they're also known to proliferate this technology. So they're a very dangerous country." He added, "I've been worried about North Korea and its potential nuclear capability for a long time. This certainly gives that potential real life, very visible life that we all ought to be very, very focused on."

And, appearing on CNN, Mullen stated, "All of this is consistent with belligerent behavior and the kind of instability creation in a part of the world that is very dangerous."

Speaking from Bolivia, where he was attending a conference of the Defense Ministers of the Americas, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that "an enrichment plant like this, assuming that is what it is, obviously gives them the potential to create a number more" nuclear weapons.

North Korea reportedly now has between 8 and 12 weapons produced with the use of plutonium recovered from spent nuclear reactor fuel rods. It has tested two of these fairly crude devices. Enriched uranium could provide an alternate means of producing more powerful weapons.

"North Korea has ignored a number of Security Council resolutions," said Gates. "They continually try to export weapons. So the notion they have developed this, is obviously a concern."

Asked about Pyongyang's insistence that it is only producing low-enriched uranium that is designed only for peaceful use in producing power, Gates told reporters, "I don't credit that at all."

South Korea's Defense Minister Kim Tae-Young told a meeting of the country's parliament that in response to the report from North Korea, the government in Seoul is considering requesting that Washington redeploy tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula.

The US military, which has some 28,500 troops deployed in Korea and has maintained a presence there since the end of the Korean War in 1953, withdrew the nuclear weapons in 1991 as part of a nuclear arms treaty with the former Soviet Union.

He said that the US and Korea would consider the redeployment when they “meet to consult on the matter at a committee for nuclear deterrence,” according to a report in the *Korea Herald*.

The Pentagon said that there are no immediate plans to bring US nuclear weapons back onto the Korean peninsula. It is widely understood, however, that a North Korean nuclear attack on South Korea would be met with a US nuclear response.

The controversy over the new nuclear facilities in North Korea came as President Barack Obama’s special envoy on North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, was in the region for talks on the possibility of reviving the six-party talks. He met with officials in Seoul and Tokyo Monday and was to hold talks in Beijing on Tuesday.

These negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear program, which include North and South Korea, Japan, the United States, Russia and China, broke down in April 2009 with Pyongyang withdrawing from the talks. North Korean officials told Hecker that work on the new reactor began the same month.

US State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley told reporters on Monday that North Korea’s showing the nuclear facility to the American scientist may have been a “publicity stunt” aimed at pressuring Washington to resume negotiations.

“We will not be drawn into rewarding North Korea for bad behavior,” he said “They frequently anticipate doing something outrageous or provocative and forcing us to jump through hoops as a result, and we’re not going to buy into this cycle.”

Washington, together with South Korea and Japan, has until now taken a harder line toward the resumption of talks, demanding as a precondition that North Korean state its willingness to disarm and acknowledge responsibility for the sinking of a South Korean warship last March in which 46 sailors died. Pyongyang has denied attacking the ship.

While the North Korean regime may have believed that unveiling the reactor and the centrifuge facility would serve to jump-start the talks, thereby opening the way toward a resumption of badly needed aid and realizing its goal of normalizing relations with Washington, this could prove a serious miscalculation.

With the Obama administration’s foreign policy in shambles and with the Republican victory in the midterm elections pushing the administration even further to the

right, it is very possible that the White House will take a more confrontational approach.

Its policy will be determined in large part by the strategic interests of US imperialism throughout Asia and, most fundamentally, by the growing frictions between Washington and Beijing.

In his remarks Sunday, the Joint Chiefs chairman Admiral Mullen indicated that Washington would utilize the controversy to step up pressure on China. “We’ve been engaged with China for an extended period of time with respect to North Korea,” Mullen said. “A great part of this, I think, will have to be done through Beijing.”

China accounts for nearly three quarters of North Korea’s trade and 90 percent of the country’s oil imports. Beijing views the country as a strategic buffer, while also fearing the impact of its economic and political destabilization under the pressure of ever-tightening sanctions. At the same time, the Chinese leadership does not want to see the North Korean nuclear question turned into a pretext for an escalation of US military power in the region or for military buildups in South Korea and Japan.

In an interview with the Armed Forces Press Service on Monday, Michele Flournoy, the undersecretary of defense for policy, gave voice to the increasingly aggressive posture of the US military in Asia.

“We think as we look out over the 21st century, Asia will be increasingly important and central to our foreign policy,” she said. Describing the US role in Asia as that of “regional stabilizer”, she added, “It’s our presence that in large part provides the stability and reassurance to the countries of the region so that economic dynamism can continue.”

This perspective of the US military as Asia’s policeman points inevitably to escalating tensions with China and the potential for military confrontation.

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