



ASIA PACIFIC

# China Set to Press North Korea Further on Nuclear Aims, Kerry Says

By MICHAEL R. GORDON FEB. 14, 2014

BEIJING — After a day of meetings with senior Chinese officials, Secretary of State John Kerry asserted on Friday that China was prepared to step up the pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programs.

Mr. Kerry said he had urged President Xi Jinping and other senior Chinese officials to “use every tool at their disposal” to persuade North Korea to rethink its decision to be a nuclear power.

Chinese officials, Mr. Kerry added, had made it clear that they supported the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula “over the long run” and were prepared to take “additional steps” if North Korea was not willing to stop its nuclear effort and begin serious negotiations.

But Mr. Kerry acknowledged that significant differences remained between the United States and China over the specifics of how to rein in North Korea’s nuclear programs. And some experts noted that a similar appeal that Mr. Kerry made in April for China to use its leverage with Pyongyang did not appear to have much effect on North Korea’s nuclear activities.

“While there was much speculation at the beginning of 2013 that the new Chinese leader would take a much tougher approach to North Korea, nothing has really changed,” said Joel S. Wit, a former State Department official who worked on policy toward North Korea. “Beijing may talk the denuclearization talk, but its main priority is stability on its borders.”

That concern, analysts have said, means China — the North's patron — is often unwilling to take a tough line with the country for fear of destabilizing its leadership, which might lead to the collapse of the North Korean state on its border or provide an opening for the United States and South Korea to gain influence there.

There has been mounting concern over the past year about North Korea's nuclear weapons effort, which has been moving on multiple tracks.

"The best way to describe it is full speed ahead," said Siegfried S. Hecker, a senior fellow at Stanford University and the former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

North Korea, Mr. Hecker noted, has reactivated its five-megawatt Yongbyon reactor, which can produce plutonium that could be used to add weapons to the country's small nuclear arsenal. In two years, he said, North Korea could have enough plutonium for two additional bombs and it could regularly produce more plutonium after that.

On a parallel front, Mr. Hecker said, it has also doubled the size of a building at Yongbyon that houses centrifuges for enriching uranium, another path to producing bombs.

Mr. Kerry also spoke with Chinese officials about disputes between China and its neighbors over territories in the South China and East China Seas.

China has been raising tension in the region by making increasingly assertive claims to islands and waters claimed by other countries, including several American allies. Mr. Kerry expressed concern that one of China's apparent efforts to advance its claims — the government's announcement in November of an air defense identification zone over much of the East China Sea — was the sort of step that undermined regional stability.

But the pace of North Korea's nuclear programs, which has been accompanied by aggressive statements by its leader, Kim Jong-un, appeared to be high on the agenda of the talks on Friday.

"My instructions from President Obama are to sit with the Chinese leadership and make the case that we cannot wait till the North has either gone so much further in its program that it's even more complicated to deal with, or created a provocation," Mr. Kerry told reporters in Seoul before flying here.

In some past exchanges, former American officials say, China and the United States have sometimes spoken past each

other, with the American officials prodding China to put more pressure on North Korea, and Chinese officials urging their American counterparts to engage in dialogue with Pyongyang.

The Obama administration has been leery of negotiating with North Korea, which it says often makes promises about scaling back its nuclear programs, only to break them and demand more concessions such as increased aid.

On Friday, there were signs that Mr. Kerry was trying to forge a common approach.

“They put some ideas on the table, and we put some ideas on the table,” Mr. Kerry said. “And both of us are taking those under evaluation.”

But it was far from clear that China and the United States share the same sense of urgency over North Korea’s nuclear effort. And some analysts say that Mr. Kim’s decision to order the execution of his uncle Jang Song-thaek, who had extensive contacts with China and was reputed to be the second most powerful official in North Korea, had heightened Beijing’s worries about stability there.

In comments carried Friday by Xinhua, China’s official news agency, the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, emphasized that China would never allow chaos or conflict on the Korean Peninsula. “China is serious on this,” Mr. Wang said.

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, the director of the Asia-Pacific Program at the United States Institute of Peace, said China had conveyed its unhappiness about North Korean provocations that might prompt the United States to upgrade its missile defenses and increase its military exercises in the region. But she questioned whether China was ready to take tough action.

“While Beijing upped its rhetoric on denuclearization, worries about stability still far trump that, especially since Jang’s purge,” she said. “Beijing sees denuclearization as a very long-term goal, achievable only when North Korea feels it has a more favorable security environment. Beijing is still not willing — nor does it feel able — to implement punitive measures that might actually push North Korea to relinquish its nuclear weapons.”

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