



1 of 5 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: US wants China to act against N. Korea;
It is considering interdicting the North's sea, air shipments

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BODY:

WASHINGTON: The Obama administration has sounded out China on interdicting North Korean sea and air shipments suspected of carrying weapons or nuclear technology.

The US is also considering imposing unilateral financial sanctions and putting Pyongyang back on the terror list in response to its nuclear test last month.

North Korea's actions 'require that we expand our consideration of new responses, including our force posture and extended deterrence options', Washington's special envoy to North Korea Stephen Bosworth said yesterday.

The five permanent United Nations Security Council members yesterday agreed on the text of a draft UN resolution that would expand sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear test last month, according to a diplomat.

The draft resolution was discussed at a meeting of the full 15-nation Security Council last night and a vote is expected tomorrow, the diplomat told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The draft resolution urges, but does not require, countries to inspect suspicious North Korean cargo and vessels and to reduce financial ties with Pyongyang. It requires that member states prohibit the supply of fuel to North Korean vessels carrying suspicious cargo that might be a violation of a partial UN trade and arms embargo against Pyongyang.

Beyond the UN sanctions, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also raised the possibility of interdictions - either at ports or air fields or on the high seas.

It is a highly provocative measure, which Pyongyang has warned would be tantamount to a declaration of war.

While Mrs Clinton did not cite assistance from China, other administration officials have been pressing Beijing to take such action under China's own laws, according to The New York Times.

Administration officials are also looking at the legal basis for reversing former president George W. Bush's decision last year to remove North Korea from a list of states that sponsor terrorism.

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But analysts said the US efforts carry risks and drawbacks.

Pushing North Korea back on the terror blacklist is a symbolic move that may spur Pyongyang into behaving more abrasively.

'The main effect here is that it opens up conduits for sanctions and diplomatic pressure. But the administration is grasping at straws really because this will make no substantive difference to the situation, and will be perceived in North Korea as a national insult,' said Mr Ted Carpenter, vice-president for defence and foreign policy studies at the conservative Cato Institute.

Other officials have indicated that the United States may impose financial sanctions on top of what may come from the UN.

The US Treasury could choose to replicate its action of 2005, when it cracked down on a Macau bank suspected of aiding the North's illicit financial activities.

But the success of such a move would depend on China's cooperation - in particular how it would enforce its anti-money laundering law to squeeze the North's external sources of financing.

In a move which suggests the US could be gearing up to disrupt the North's financial flows, South Korea has given the US information on up to 20 North Korean bank accounts in China and Switzerland at Washington's request. The accounts are possibly connected with illegal transactions or money laundering, the Chosun Ilbo reported yesterday.

The 2006 UN resolution imposing an embargo on exports of heavy weapons, dual-use items and luxury goods to North Korea has had no perceptible effect on North Korea's trade with China and South Korea, noted a study released this year by Petersen Institute expert Marcus Noland.

Calling North Korea 'the land of lousy options', Mr Kurt Campbell, the nominee for the post of assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said the focus should be on getting the North to return to the six-nation nuclear talks.

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