

The Washington Times

Diplomacy downplay: Obama administration minimizes latest North Korean nuke threat

By: Guy Taylor and Shaun Waterman – April 4, 2013

The Obama administration appeared eager Thursday to downplay the North Korean military's latest threat that it has the final authority to carry out "cutting-edge, smaller, lighter and diversified" nuclear strikes on the United States.

"This is just the latest in a long line of aggressive statements," said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland, who told reporters at Foggy Bottom that the recent tension between Washington and Pyongyang "does not need to get hotter."

The remarks were the first public reaction from the Obama administration since Wednesday's claim by the North Korean military that the "moment of explosion is approaching fast" with the possibility of war breaking out "today or tomorrow."

The claims heightened concerns in Seoul on Thursday, where South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin reported that North Korea appeared to be moving an intermediate-range missile to a launch site on its east coast, possibly putting it in range of the U.S. island territory of Guam.

In remarks that dovetailed with those made by Ms. Nuland, however, Mr. Kim said the North Korean missile did not appear to be aimed at the United States, but likely was being prepared for some kind of test or show firing, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

He also said neither South Korean nor U.S. intelligence had seen the sort of rear echelon and logistic unit movements that would be expected if North Korea were truly gearing up for a full-scale invasion or assault on South Korea.

With North Korea having previously carried out missile test firings on dates of important domestic history, foreign policy analysts note the April 15 birthday of North Korea's founder Kim Il-sung — grandfather of the nation's 28-year-old current leader Kim Jong-un — is less than two weeks away.

In Washington, meanwhile, Ms. Nuland denied that the administration was intentionally softening its rhetoric toward North Korea on Thursday out of concern that statements

made recently by senior officials — along with the Pentagon's highly publicized movement of new U.S. military assets to the region — may have served to escalate the ongoing tensions.

"I ... reject the notion that there is a new tone one way or the other," she said, adding that in light of the recent string of "bellicose threats" made by North Korea, the administration has had "to take it seriously."

White House spokesman Jay Carney was similarly cautious, telling reporters Thursday afternoon on Air Force One that Mr. Obama and his national security team are closely monitoring the situation but not saying whether the missile maneuvers mean the U.S. now views the matter as anything more than an idle threat.

"Threats and provocative actions will not bring {North Korea} the security, international respect and economic development it seeks," Mr. Carney said. "We continue to urge North Korean leadership to heed President Obama's call to choose the path of peace."

Mr. Carney also would not say whether Mr. Obama had plans to address the North Korean actions publicly, saying only that "I don't have any scheduling announcements today."

Obama administration officials consistently have blamed Pyongyang for stoking tensions in the region with talk of nuclear strikes, making it necessary for Washington to reassure allies in the region about the integrity of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

"The moves that we have been making are designed to ensure and to reassure the American people and our allies that we can defend the United States, that we will and that we can defend our allies," Ms. Nuland said Thursday. "So from that perspective, it was the ratcheting up of tensions on the [North Korean] side that caused us to need to shore up our own defense posture."

One veteran analyst told The Washington Times, however, that North Korea's leadership had only learned about the recent deployment of nuclear-capable American B-2 stealth bombers through reports in the news media, which were "very scary" for Pyongyang.

American muscle-flexing, such as tweeting photos of a B-2 bomber flying over South Korea — which the U.S. Embassy in Seoul did last week — was unlikely to dissuade North Korea from heightening its already antagonistic posture, said John McCreary, a retired military intelligence analyst and longtime Korea watcher.

"The announced moves are not deterrent to the North Koreans, they are provocative and escalatory," said Mr. McCreary, now with Kforce Government Solutions, a private firm based in Virginia.

Others cautioned against registering the recent threats made by Pyongyang as indicative of a shift toward a new and offensive posture under Kim Jong-un.

"North Korea's latest bellicosity is unusually violent, but nothing suggests that this Kim, any more than his father or grandfather, is suicidal," Doug Bandow, who specializes in foreign policy at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote in an analysis published by U.S. News and World Report on Wednesday.

While he said war still could break out via mistake or miscalculation, Mr. Bandow argued that "Washington gains nothing from fixating on the intentions of a bankrupt and backward state which has little ability to strike Americans, except those Washington has voluntarily placed within range — the 28,500 military personnel stationed in South Korea."

But this week's uptick in tension also included a report by North Korea's state-run news agency that the nation's atomic energy department has plans to "readjust and restart" all of the nuclear facilities at its main nuclear complex, in an area north of Pyongyang known as Yongbyon.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry responded to that report Tuesday by warning that a reactivation of the facility would be "in direct violation" of North Korea's international obligations and a "provocative act."

A report by the "38 North" publication produced by Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies sent questions swirling through some corners of Washington's foreign policy community Thursday on the extent to which North Korea already may be preparing operations at Yongbyon.

"Commercial satellite imagery" indicates that North Korea actually has begun "new construction at a plutonium production reactor located at the Yongbyon nuclear complex that may be intended to restart the facility," the report says.

Patrick Cronin, who heads the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for New American Security think tank in Washington, called the report "not at all surprising" and said "38 North" was as "reliable an open source of information as you're going to get."

The deeper question centers on how important the development actually is, said Mr. Cronin, who added that "It's what [the North Koreans] are not showing us that I'm more worried about."

The State Department and Pentagon, meanwhile, have suggested that a core part of the administration's Korea strategy is to gently push China to play a more active role in steering Pyongyang away from provocations and threats that may ultimately provoke military conflict.

Ms. Nuland said Thursday that North Korea "has been the subject of intense conversations" between Mr. Kerry and his Chinese counterparts ahead of the secretary of state's visit to Beijing later this month.