



White House

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Obama lays low on Korea conflict

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Wary of intensifying the gathering conflict between North Korea and South Korea, the White House is speaking in measured tones while trying unsuccessfully to persuade China to intervene.

Meeting with South Korean leaders in Seoul, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "we cannot turn a blind eye to belligerence and provocation."

"This was an unacceptable provocation by North Korea," Clinton said. "And the international community has a responsibility and a duty to respond."

The United States concurs with an international investigation that concluded North Korea on March 26 sunk the South Korean ship Cheonan, killing 46 on board. The event reignited the two nations' long-simmering hostilities, and threatens the wary peace in the region.

Clinton arrived in South Korea from Beijing, where she tried with no apparent success to persuade China to intervene directly with its ally North Korea to defuse the escalating crisis. China so far has failed to condemn the attack or join calls for disciplining Pyongyang.

Instead, Clinton indicated the standoff is heading to the United Nations Security Council, where a range of sanctions are already in place over North Korea's nuclear testing programs.

"The U.S. and South Korean militaries have announced plans for joint exercises, and we will explore further enhancements to our posture on the peninsula, to ensure readiness, and to deter future attacks," Clinton warned.

The U.S. military maintains a force of more than 28,000 troops in South Korea.

Although far short of a provocative stance, Clinton's remarks were a step beyond a statement released earlier this week from the White House, in which press secretary Robert Gibbs talked about "ongoing dialogue" and support for South Korean President Myung-bak Lee.

Typically, to keep the heat turned down on international conflicts, the White House prefers to keep the

president from commenting for as long as possible, relying instead on surrogates.

Victor Cha, Korea chairman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called China's handling of Cheonon matter "clumsy."

"The best we can hope for is that, as a voting member of the Security Council, China will not veto any resolution brought to the table," Cha said. "It has basically acted like North Korea's defense lawyer in the public arena and tried to maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula."

North Korea has denied involvement in the attack and is accusing the South of fabricating the incident. Both countries are cutting off ties to the other, including halting trade and expelling government workers.

Chris Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, gave the Obama administration strong marks for treading lightly in this latest foreign policy flare-up.

"It's inevitable that the U.S. is going to get caught in these kinds of disputes by virtue of the fact that we have been there for close to 60 years," Preble said. "We are dealing with a very erratic regime in the North, and the South's response so far has been very measured -- and that is encouraging."

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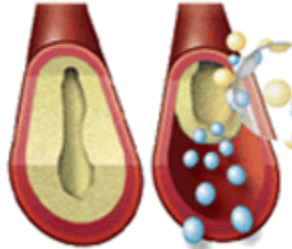
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