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US to boost anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia Pacific

By Peter Symonds

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US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel announced yesterday that the Pentagon would expand the number of ground-based, anti-ballistic missile interceptors deployed in the Asia Pacific region by nearly 50 percent by 2017. An additional 14 interceptors would be based at Fort Greely in Alaska on top of 26 already in place. Another three are already stationed in California.

Hagel seized on North Korea's nuclear test last month and its satellite launch in December as the pretext for the expansion of US anti-ballistic missile systems. "North Korea, in particular, has recently made advances in its capabilities and has engaged in a series of irresponsible and reckless provocations," he said.

These comments are completely cynical. The Obama administration is exploiting North Korea's limited nuclear and missile capability to justify the build-up of sophisticated anti-missile systems throughout the Asia Pacific region that are aimed primarily at countering China's nuclear arsenal.

In response to additional UN Security Council sanctions earlier this month, the North Korean regime declared that it had the right to defend itself, including through "a pre-emptive nuclear attack against the headquarters of the aggressor." The Obama administration, however, simply

dismissed the threat. Neither Hagel nor any Pentagon official has suggested that Pyongyang actually has the ability to carry out such an attack on Washington.

Moreover, Pentagon plans to expand the number of interceptors predate both the North Korean missile launch and nuclear test. A senior American defence official told the *Washington Post* that the expansion “had been in the works for about six months.” In other words, North Korea had simply supplied a convenient excuse for the announcement.

Hagel also announced that the US would deploy an additional early warning system to Japan—a sophisticated X-band radar capable of tracking ballistic missiles. The US already has one such installation in northern Japan and is planning the second in the south of the country.

The Pentagon leaked details of its anti-ballistic missile plans to the *Wall Street Journal* last August (see: “US to expand anti-missile systems in Asia”). According to that report, the US is also seeking to build a third X-band radar installation in South East Asia, possibly in the Philippines. Each additional early warning system greatly enhances the US military’s ability to track the trajectory of ballistic missiles and thus to destroy them with interceptors.

The US is developing and building these anti-ballistic missile systems in close collaboration with its major allies in Asia, especially Japan. In addition to long-range, land-based interceptors in North America, the US and Japan have ship-based anti-missile systems and are seeking to enhance their capacities.

The US navy recently boosted the number of its *Arleigh Burke* -class guided missile destroyers in waters off the Korean Peninsula, as part of joint exercises with South Korea. The US military also has Patriot missile batteries in South Korea.

To suggest that the US is spending tens of billions of dollars on anti-ballistic missile defences to counter the threat from North Korea—and, in the case of the missile defences it is building in Europe, to counter the threat from Iran—is absurd. These systems are primarily aimed at China and Russia, which do have the capability to strike the US with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles.

Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* last August, an unnamed senior American official acknowledged that any anti-ballistic missile system aimed at North Korea is also aimed at China, by virtue of geography. “Physics is physics,” he said. “You’re either blocking North Korea and China, or you’re not blocking either of them.”

The claim that these systems are purely defensive is also a lie. Any large-scale nuclear attack by either Russia or China would overwhelm the limited number of US interceptors. Rather, the development of anti-ballistic missile capabilities is a component of an aggressive drive to secure so-called “nuclear primacy”—that is, the ability to launch a first nuclear strike that would devastate an enemy and render them unable to retaliate.

US anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia and Europe are primarily designed to neutralise a limited salvo of missiles, fired by an enemy already badly damaged by a first nuclear strike by the United States.

This is why both Russia and China strenuously object to the deployment of anti-missile systems. In Beijing, yesterday's announcement by Hagel will only intensify the debate in ruling circles over North Korea. Sections of the Chinese bureaucracy are openly suggesting that its ally, Pyongyang, has become a liability that should be cut loose.

The Chinese critics point out that North Korea's weapons programs and posturing have not only provided the US and its allies with a pretext for placing anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia. It could also be seized on by Japan and South Korea to build their own nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

Beijing is caught in a dilemma, however. If the North Korean regime, which is heavily dependent on China economically, were to collapse, the result could be a flood of refugees into northern China and potentially the emergence of a pro-US regime on China's northern border. At this stage, no decision appears to have been taken, but intensifying pressure from Washington makes the issue all the more urgent and explosive.

The US build-up of anti-ballistic missile capacity is part of the Obama administration's broader "pivot to Asia," which involves a comprehensive diplomatic effort throughout the region to undermine Chinese influence and consolidate a system of military alliances to encircle China. This is combined with the "rebalancing" of US military forces to Asia as well as within the region to ensure the US has a range of aggressive options—from a naval blockade of China to a full-scale nuclear war.

Beijing is being compelled to respond. In January, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua announced that the military had successfully tested a ground-based ballistic missile interceptor. Air force expert Fu Qianshao told the media, however, that Chinese systems were still in their infancy and lagged behind the US.

In this area of military technology, as in others, the Obama administration is provoking a dangerous arms race that only increases the danger of war.