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Pyongyang may try out mid-range weapon Kerry flies in as missile test fears escalate

Bradley Klapper

Seoul | US Secretary of State **John Kerry** arrived in South Korea on Friday on an unusual diplomatic journey, travelling directly into a region bracing for a possible North Korean missile test – and running the risk that his presence alone could spur Pyongyang into another headline-seeking provocation.

Mr Kerry was kicking off four days of talks in East Asia amid speculation that the North's unpredictable regime would launch a mid-range missile designed to reach as far as the US territory of Guam. Mr Kerry also planned to visit China and Japan.

North Korea often times its provocations to generate maximum attention, and Mr Kerry's presence in Seoul will provide plenty of that, even if the United States is engaged in intense diplomacy with China, the North's benefactor, in



John Kerry, left, planned the trip to South Korea well before the latest danger emerged on the Korean peninsula.

He is relying on China to take a bigger role in pressuring Pyongyang to live up to its nuclear and missile program agreements.

an effort to lower tensions. Another dangerous date is April 15, the 101st birthday of North Korea's deceased founder, Kim Il Sung.

Mr Kerry's trip coincides with the disclosure of a new US intelligence report that concludes North Korea has advanced its knowhow to the point that it could arm a missile with a nuclear warhead. The analysis, disclosed on Thursday at a congressional hearing in Washington, said the Pentagon has "moderate confidence" that North Korea has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic missiles but that such a weapon would be unreliable.

Pentagon spokesman George Little said afterwards that "it would be inaccurate to suggest that the North Korean regime has fully tested, developed or demonstrated the kinds of nuclear capabilities referenced" at the congressional hearing.

James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, said he concurred with Mr Little and noted that the report alluded to at the hearing was compiled by the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence Agency and was not an assessment by the entire US intelligence community. "Moreover, North Korea has not yet demonstrated the full range of capabilities

necessary for a nuclear armed missile," he said.

President **Barack Obama** on Thursday urged calm, calling on Pyongyang to end its sabre-rattling while sternly warning that he would "take all necessary steps" to protect US citizens.

Mr Kerry's trip marks his first foray to the Asia-Pacific region as the top US diplomat, spearheading the effort to "pivot" US power away from Europe and the Middle East and towards the world's most populous region and fulcrum of economic growth.

And it comes on the heels of months of provocation from Pyongyang, including talk of nuclear strikes against the US – however outlandish analysts consider such threats. No one is discounting the danger entirely after tests of a nuclear device and ballistic missile technology in recent months.

Mr Kerry's trip was planned well before the latest danger to destabilise the Korean peninsula – North Korea's apparent preparations for another missile test in defiance of United Nations resolutions.

The Obama administration believes North Korea is preparing for another missile test, said a senior State Department official travelling with Mr Kerry to Seoul. "We will show to our allies that we are prepared and we will defend them," the official said.

To mitigate the threat, Mr Kerry is largely depending on China to take a bigger role in pressuring Pyongyang to live up to agreements to halt its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Beijing has the most leverage with Pyongyang. It has boosted trade with its Communist neighbour and maintains close military ties. And the US believes the Chinese could take several steps to show North Korea it cannot threaten regional stability with impunity.

These include getting China to cut off support for North Korea's weapons of mass destruction program, said the State Department official and another senior administration official, although they rejected talk that the US was seeking a commercial embargo against the North. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorised to speak publicly about Mr Kerry's meetings in advance.

Neither could say whether Pyongyang under its enigmatic young leader, **Kim Jong-un**, was actually listening at this point.

One of them stressed that he "wouldn't say there is no conversation between them," but declined to describe the level and impact of Chinese-North Korean contacts.

AP



Baring their rage ... anti-patriarchy protesters distract Vladimir Putin from trade talks with Angela Merkel. PHOTO: AFP

East, West divide persists

Russia



Kim Traill

Vienna | The look on **Vladimir Putin's** face said it all.

The Russian President and German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** had just passed the Volkswagen stand at a trade fair in Hanover when three Ukrainian women, naked from the waist up and painted with obscenities in Cyrillic, rushed towards them, screaming "F--- you, dictator".

Not normally one to tolerate dissent, this was a gesture even iron-fisted Mr Putin found entertaining. He gave the girls two thumbs up, telling press he "liked the performance", although he "couldn't hear what they were shouting". "The organisers should thank the Ukrainian girls for helping promote the fair," he joked afterwards.

Members of activist group, FEMEN, the women have gained notoriety for their trademark topless demonstrations against "patriarchy", by baring their breasts at former Italian prime minister **Silvio Berlusconi**, the Pope and Mr Putin, among others.

"Putin is a bastard," declared Alexandra Shevchenko, a participant in Monday's action, before denouncing his response as "stupid". The 24 year-old said their aim was to draw attention to human and women's rights in Russia, and "this situation with Pussy Riot", referring to members of the punk band still in detention after being convicted of "hooliganism" following a stunt in a Moscow cathedral last February.

Mr Putin's visit, combining trade talks with the opening of Germany's largest trade fair, was intended to be a sign of strengthening relations between Russia and Germany. Russia is a major supplier of oil and natural gas to Germany, which sends luxury cars, industrial machinery and \$US25 billion in investment back east.

But his reception served to highlight the vast gulf between Russia and the West, particularly when it comes to issues of human rights.

On Sunday, angry demonstrators protested over his crackdown on non-government organisations, including two German-financed groups. The new law forces "NGOs engaged in Russia's internal political processes and sponsored from abroad" to be registered as "foreign agents".

Hundreds of NGOs, including human rights advocates Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been targeted, many reporting raids on offices and intimidation by Russian tax and law officials. Berlin is a critic of the bill, which it sees as an attempt to stifle opposition and undermine the democratic process.

In a pre-trip interview with German TV station ARD, Mr Putin defended the law, citing "similar" US legislation from the 1930s. Insisting the 654 NGOs that had received "almost \$US1 billion in foreign sponsorship over the past four months" would be allowed to continue operations, he added, "we only ask

We have made a decisive choice for democracy. Compare the USSR with modern Russia.

Vladimir Putin

them to admit they are engaged in political activities, and are funded from abroad. The public has the right to know this."

Unconvinced, Dr Merkel expressed her concerns directly to Mr Putin, stressing German support for an "active civil society". The leaders also disagreed over Russia's delivery of arms to Syria. Russia recognises President Bashar al-Assad as a legitimate leader, while in Dr Merkel's view "the authority of Mr Assad no longer exists".

German newspaper commentators described Mr Putin's government since his return to the presidency in May 2012 as an "authoritarian regime, slowly transforming into a bona fide dictatorship".

The NGO raids "clearly show the

direction Moscow is headed", wrote the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Next on Mr Putin's tour was Amsterdam, to meet Dutch Prime Minister **Mark Rutte**. Here, gay rights activists booed and whistled, accusing Russia of discrimination against homosexuals over a measure to ban gay propaganda, and hung a "Human Rights Free Zone" banner on his route. Mr Putin remained unperturbed, quipping he was "glad the gays hadn't taken their clothes off".

Many Russians find criticism by Western media and politicians humiliating. They believe the West is simply afraid that Russia is becoming strong again, preferring "order" and a strong leader over the chaos of the "wild lawless 1990s". In their view, FEMEN are "exhibitionists", Pussy Riot members are "hooligans" who deserve prison, and "when we had freedom of speech, you could buy pornography on every street corner". Few seem to know or care whether Russia sells arms to Syria.

Others, including émigrés in Vienna, are deeply "disappointed" by Mr Putin's latest moves. "His actions are based on keeping himself and his clique in power," said one. "He claims to be clamping down on corruption, arresting people every day. But all his rich friends are safe. The laws are applied selectively." Many had hoped to return one day, but now fear "with an economy based on weapons and oil" and a threatened civil society, there is no hope for the future of their motherland.

Mr Putin rejects the notion that his government is anything but democratic. "It is obvious we have made a decisive choice for democracy," he told ARD. "Compare the USSR with modern Russia and there is a significant difference. Other countries took 200, 300, 400 years to achieve this goal. Do you expect us to cover this distance in two decades?"

The Germans are sceptical, but how far they will push Mr Putin and what the effect will be on relations between Russia and the West remains to be seen.

Kim Traill is the author of *Red Square Blues: A Beginner's Guide to the Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union*.

Strike force

Maximum range of North Korean missiles and their number

Type of missiles	Range ('000 km)	Number (pcs)
Scud-V	0-1	100-150
Hwasong-5	0-1	150
Scud-S	0-1	300
Hwasong-6	0-1	300
Scud-ER	0-1	50
Nodong-A	0-1	200
Taepodong-1	0-1	n/a
Nodong-B (Musudan)	0-1	20
Taepodong-2	0-1	n/a
Taepodong-3	0-1	n/a

SOURCE: RIANOVOSTI