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Headline: US, China agree on nuke security, climate change

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WASHINGTON—The United States and China on Thursday vowed robust collaboration to improve nuclear security and to implement a global climate change deal, but remained far apart on the hotly contested South China Sea and US missile defense plans for South Korea.

As world leaders gathered for a nuclear security summit amid mounting threats from North Korea, US President Barack Obama urged closer security ties among its chief allies in Asia and increased cooperation with strategic rival China to discourage Pyongyang from further advances in nuclear weapons.

Obama first met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye. Together, they warned North Korea would face even tougher sanctions and more isolation if it provokes again with nuclear and missile tests.

Then Obama met Chinese President Xi Jinping and both called for North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

China also agreed to implement in full the latest economic restrictions imposed by the United Nations Security Council against Pyongyang.

Obama and Xi also agreed to continue to work on a bilateral investment treaty, China's Assistant Foreign Minister Zheng Zeguang told a news briefing.

Missile defense plans

But Zheng made clear that China and the United States remained at odds over the contested South China Sea, where Beijing's broad territorial claims have riled its neighbors, and over US missile defense plans following North Korea's recent nuclear and rocket tests.

According to Zheng, Xi told Obama that China was "firmly opposed" to the United States deploying a new missile defense system in South Korea, saying it was against China's national security interests and would affect the strategic balance in the region.

Washington and Seoul are considering that deployment to counter the threat from the North. China contends the system would also give the United States radar coverage over Chinese territory. Russia opposes it as well.

The United States has also opposed China's move to build artificial islands and military facilities in the disputed South China Sea.

Japan and South Korea are similarly concerned about China's military buildup and assertive actions in the region's disputed waters.

PH arbitration case

Tensions appear set to intensify with an upcoming ruling from the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration in favor of the Philippines, which has challenged the legal basis of some of Beijing's sweeping territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The United States has supported the right of the Philippines, a defense treaty ally, to submit the case and says the ruling should be binding on both parties, although China has boycotted the proceedings and says it will ignore it.

Xi told Obama that the South China Sea islands claimed by the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan have been China's territory since ancient times and it has the right to defend its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights, Zheng said.

Xi also told Obama that he hoped Washington would "strictly" abide by its commitment not to take a position on sovereignty issues and instead play a constructive role to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea, Zheng said.

"The hope is that all parties will correctly view and handle the South China Sea and adopt an objective and impartial attitude ... particularly countries outside this region," he said.

China's official news agency Xinhua also quoted Xi as warning that China would not accept violations of its sovereignty in the name of freedom of navigation—a reference to air and naval patrols the United States has conducted within the disputed waters but China insists are part of its territory.

China claims nearly all of the 3.5-million-square-kilometer South China Sea, including waters within the exclusive economic zones of the other claimants.

About \$5 trillion in global trade passes every year through the South China Sea, where islets, reefs and atolls are believed to be sitting atop vast energy reserves.

The United States says it takes no sides in the disputes but wants to ensure free navigation. It has said it will increase what it calls freedom-of-navigation operations by its Navy ships through the waters.

'Rules-based order'

Obama, speaking after a meeting with the leaders of Japan and South Korea, said the three countries shared a common vision for the Asia-Pacific region based on "a rules-based order in which all countries, regardless of size, act according to shared norms and shared principles," in an apparent criticism of China's pursuit of its territorial claims in East Asia.

US officials have expressed concern that Beijing could declare an air defense identification zone, or Adiz, in the South China Sea, as it did in the East China Sea in 2013.

On Wednesday, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work said the United States had told China it would not recognize an exclusion zone in the South China Sea and would view such a move as "destabilizing."

More than 50 governments and international organizations are attending the two-day summit on preventing nuclear terrorism, the last in a series of global meetings Obama has championed on the issue.

North Korean threat

The risk posed by the Islamic State (IS) group tops this year's agenda but concerns about North Korea are also commanding focus.

"Of great importance to both of us is North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, which threatens the security and stability of the region. President Xi and I are both committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Obama said at the start of his meeting with Xi.

"China and the US have a responsibility to work together," Xi said in his comments made to reporters through an interpreter.

As for their "disputes and disagreements," the Chinese leader said the two sides could "seek active solutions through dialogue and consultation."

North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January, followed by a space launch in February, have heralded more convergence among often-fractious powers in East Asia at least on the need to press the government of Kim Jong-un toward disarming.

Japan and South Korea have persuasive reasons to get along. They both host US forces and are both in range of North Korean missiles.

But their relations have been plagued by historical differences that date back to Japan's colonial occupation of Korea in the first half of the 20th century and its military's use of sex slaves during World War II.

Those tensions have eased some, though. Abe said North Korean nuclear and missile capability was a "direct and grave threat" to them all.

"Should it choose to undertake yet another provocation, it is certain to find itself facing even tougher sanctions and isolation," Park said, referring to Pyongyang.

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The North's Kim has also alienated the country's traditional benefactor and main trading partner, China. The United States has long urged Beijing to take a more forceful role in pressing North Korea, and Zheng said after the Obama-Xi meeting that the two sides agreed the new UN resolution "should be implemented in full and in its entirety."