

US ready to 'reach out' to N Korea: Kerry

Written by Taipei Times

Monday, 15 April 2013 08:15 -



US Secretary of State John Kerry, left, and Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida listen to questions from reporters during their joint news conference in Tokyo yesterday.

Photo: REUTERS

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday stressed the US is willing to engage with North Korea as long as it takes steps to give up nuclear weapons.

He also vowed the US would protect its Asian allies against any provocative acts by the North, but said Washington wants a peaceful solution to tensions in the region.

"We are prepared to reach out, but we need [the] appropriate moment, appropriate circumstance," Kerry said, adding that North Korea had to take steps toward giving up its nuclear programs.

"They have to take some actions. Now how many and how much I want to have a discussion with folks back in Washington [about] ... but they have to take action," Kerry told reporters.

The North has threatened for weeks to attack the US, South Korea and Japan since new UN sanctions were imposed in response to its latest nuclear arms test in February. Speculation has mounted of a new missile launch or nuclear test.

"I think it is really unfortunate that there has been so much focus and attention in the media and elsewhere on the subject of war, when what we really ought to be talking about is the

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possibility of peace. And I think there are those possibilities," Kerry earlier told a news conference in Tokyo after a meeting with his Japanese counterpart, Fumio Kishida.

Kerry was in Japan for the final stop on an Asian tour aimed at solidifying support for curbing North Korea's nuclear program, and reassuring US allies.

Kerry said the US would "do what was necessary" to defend its allies Japan and South Korea, but added: "Our choice is to negotiate, our choice is to move to the table and find a way for the region to have peace."

Kerry also sought to clarify his comments made in Beijing on Saturday, which some took to suggest he might be offering to remove recently boosted missile defense capabilities in Asia if China persuaded North Korea to abandon its atomic programs.

The Pentagon in recent weeks has announced plans to position two Aegis guided-missile destroyers in the western Pacific and a missile defense system to Guam.

"The president of the United States deployed some additional missile defense capacity precisely because of the threat of North Korea. And it is logical that if the threat of North Korea disappears because the peninsula denuclearizes, then obviously that threat no longer mandates that kind of posture. But there have been no agreements, no discussions, there is nothing actually on the table with respect to that," Kerry said.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2013/04/15](#)