

Clinton leaves for Asia

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WASHINGTON - US SECRETARY of State Hillary Clinton left for Asia on Sunday for her maiden mission as the chief US diplomat after pledging to strengthen US ties with the region.

High among her priorities are finding ways to tackle the global economic crisis and climate change as well as prevent nuclear proliferation.

The new diplomatic chief's choice to travel to Japan, where she is expected on Monday, as well as to Indonesia, South Korea and China, reflects a quest for a long-term strategy to deal with the changing dynamic in global economic, political and military power, analysts say.

Her predecessors usually travelled first to Europe or the Middle East.

Two days ahead of her departure, Mrs Clinton said she was 'ready to work with leaders in Asia to resolve the economic crisis' and 'strengthen our historic partnerships and alliances'. In her first foreign policy speech delivered before the New York-based Asia Society, Mrs Clinton said she is also 'ready to help prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Asia.' Clinton said North Korea's nuclear program remains 'the most acute challenge to stability in northeast Asia'. President Barack Obama's administration would build a strong relationship with the reclusive communist regime if it scraps its nuclear program, which alarmed the world in 2006 with the test of a nuclear device, she said.

Washington would also 'assist in meeting the energy and other economic needs of the North Korean people,' who face hunger and economic hardships, she added.

Under a landmark deal in 2007 with the United States, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia, North Korea agreed to eliminate its weapons-grade nuclear programs in exchange for energy aid.

The talks stalled late last year when North Korea balked at its five partners' demands for inspections and other steps to verify disarmament.

Mrs Clinton also said it is 'incumbent on North Korea to avoid any provocative action and unhelpful rhetoric toward South Korea', after North Korea scrapped military accords with the South in the last few weeks.

Reports from South Korea say Pyongyang is preparing for the launch of a long-range missile.

Mrs Clinton said on Friday she would meet families of Japanese abducted by North Korea, signaling that Washington is determined to press Pyongyang to clear up their fate. Her visit comes at a time of rising cross-border tensions, with North Korea's de facto head of state on Sunday threatening 'decisive actions' against South Korea if it continues to challenge Pyongyang.

Kim Yong-Nam accused Seoul's conservative government of pushing relations to the 'brink of war' by violating summit accords reached between Pyongyang and Seoul in 2000 and 2007.

Meanwhile, South Korea's government urged activists to halt Monday's planned launch of tens of thousands of anti-Pyongyang leaflets across the border to mark the 67th birthday of North Korean

leader Kim Jong-Il, warning that the campaign could inflame the current tensions.

Mrs Clinton is traveling with Todd Stern, her special envoy for climate change, and Christopher Hill, the Bush administration's negotiator on North Korea who is now a leading candidate to become ambassador to Iraq.

She appears to have chosen Japan for her first Asia stop to smooth feathers she ruffled there after writing during the US presidential primary campaign that the US-China relationship will be the most important one, according to Michael Green, an Asia adviser to former president George W. Bush.

Issues to be raised

HILLARY Clinton will visit Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China this week on her first foreign trip as US secretary of state. She arrives in Tokyo on Monday. Here are some issues likely to be raised:

JAPAN -

Strategic reassurance. Japan would like reassurance that it remains Washington's closest ally in Asia, amid pressure for Tokyo to take a bigger global role.

- Security. Prime Minister Taro Aso's popularity is sinking, and the opposition is able to stall bills in parliament, so Tokyo would prefer not to face tough demands for contributions to security efforts, including in Afghanistan, that could turn off voters.

- Trade. Japan wants assurances the United States is not turning protectionist.

- Japanese abductees in North Korea. Tokyo felt the Bush administration's removal of North Korea from its list of state terrorism sponsors last year eased pressure on Pyongyang to settle the issue of Japanese citizens abducted decades ago.

Mrs Clinton said on her way to Japan that she planned to press North Korea to account for the abducted Japanese.

SOUTH KOREA -

North Korea. Mrs Clinton has offered North Korea normal relations, a peace treaty and energy and economic assistance, but made clear it would have to abandon its nuclear programmes first.

Pyongyang, which may be preparing to test-fire its longest-range missile, has not commented on the offer. It has recently threatened to reduce South Korea to ashes. The South has pledged in response to uphold hard-line policies against the North. Amid the North's rhetoric, Mrs Clinton will likely discuss how to revive six-country talks meant to lead to Pyongyang's nuclear disarmament.

- Trade. Seoul has also expressed concerns about US protectionism. Lawmakers in the ruling Grand National Party say a South Korea-US free trade pact now pending in parliament may not be ratified until April. The Obama administration has expressed reservations about the pact, and said the provisions on autos need to be revised.

- Command control. In April 2012, the United States will hand South Korea operational control of its own troops in times of war, ending a legacy of the Korean War. Mrs Clinton could discuss preparations for the handover and plans for the alliance.

- Afghanistan. Washington has approached Seoul informally about contributing troops to Afghan

operations. There seems to be little appetite for such a mission in South Korea.

CHINA -

Security. The United States and China will later this month resume military-to-military talks that Beijing suspended last year after US arms sales to Taiwan. China regards self-ruled Taiwan as a renegade province that it has vowed to recover, by force if necessary. The United States switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 1979, but remains Taiwan's biggest ally and arms supplier.

- North Korea. Mrs Clinton will likely discuss six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear disarmament with Beijing. Washington has largely relied on China in recent years to pressure the North over its weapons programmes. But China, host of the six-party talks, will also seek reassurances it will not be sidelined in any bilateral talks Washington holds with Pyongyang.

- Trade and protectionism. The United States buys more Chinese exports than any other country, and China is the largest holder of US treasury bonds. Mrs Clinton could discuss China's concerns about US protectionism and Beijing's role in restructuring the global financial system.

- The yuan. Mr Obama has already urged China to continue appreciating the yuan, which the United States sees as undervalued. China has halted the appreciation in recent months. Beijing also criticised US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner last month after he said Mr Obama believed China was 'manipulating' its currency and would push for changes.

- Human rights. Mrs Clinton has said she would not be shying away from talking about human rights issues but has noted there is a 'very broad agenda' in the relationship with China. Last year Mrs Clinton urged then President Bush to boycott the opening ceremony of the Olympics unless China improved human rights.

China says it protects human rights, but critics say it tortures and jails dissidents and suppresses ethnic minorities.

- Climate change. Mrs Clinton is expected to lay the groundwork to work with China on climate change. She said last week that collaboration on 'clean' energy offered a way to strengthen ties with China, saying she would visit a 'clean' thermal plant while in Beijing that was built with US and Chinese technology.

INDONESIA -

Stability. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono will showcase the country's stability. Jakarta is also eager to highlight how the world's most populous Muslim nation has remained predominantly moderate.

- Trade. The United States is Indonesia's second-biggest export destination after Japan, but Jakarta is concerned over a slide in exports of commodities such as palm oil, rubber and nickel to developed economies. A number of major US resource firms such as Newmont and Chevron also operate in Indonesia and Jakarta wants to attract more investment.

- Security. Jakarta and Washington have cooperated in the fight against Islamic militants, but Indonesia also wants to modernise its poorly equipped military.

- Indonesia wants a bigger role in world affairs, notably in the Middle East. It has friendly ties with countries such as North Korea and Iran, and has previously sought ways to mediate in disputes. It may look to leverage off this. — REUTERS

P.S.

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