

Tensions deepen on the Korean Peninsula following ultimatum by Pyongyang

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An ultimatum issued by North Korea that South Korea cease propaganda broadcasts across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two states is set to expire today at 5:00 p.m. Seoul time. South Korea, with the backing of the United States, has ignored the warning, causing tensions to further escalate.

Pyongyang issued the ultimatum Thursday afternoon, shortly after an exchange of artillery fire. Seoul claims that North Korea fired a single 14.5 mm anti-aircraft shell that landed on the South's side of the border, followed by several 76.2 mm rounds. South Korea responded with a barrage of 155 mm shells. Neither side reported any casualties.

North Korea announced on Friday that its leader Kim Jong-un declared a “quasi-state of war,” and that its army is finishing preparations for combat. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) issued the following statement: “The Korean People’s Army (KPA) front-line, large combined units entered into a wartime state all at once, fully armed to launch surprise operations, and wound up their preparedness for action.”

While other countries in the region, including China and Japan, have called for restraint, South Korea has issued similarly bellicose remarks. Defense Minister Han Min-gu said on Friday, during a meeting with military commanders, that the South would “respond resolutely” to any action by the North, echoing similar statements by President Park Geun-hye. The South also issued a statement asserting that it “will strongly retaliate against any kind of North Korean attacks and the North will have to take all the responsibility for such retaliatory actions.”

The North Korean Foreign Ministry replied with a statement early Saturday, declaring that “the situation that has reached the brink of war is now hardly

controllable.” South Korea’s military was reportedly placed on “maximum alert.”

Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said yesterday: “The (Japanese) government is deeply concerned over the action (by the North). We urge North Korea to refrain from carrying out such acts of provocation.” However, Suga also stated that Japan was “closely cooperating” with Washington and Seoul.

China called on both the North and South to “exercise restraint.” The Chinese ambassador to South Korea, Qui Guohong, stated: “We oppose unilateral provocation from any side. We would like the South and the North to autonomously achieve a peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and cooperation.”

Beijing’s use of the word “autonomously” is a coded reference to its demand that Washington end its interference in affairs on the Korean Peninsula. The Chinese regime is acutely conscious that Washington utilizes North Korea as a pretext for the deployment of American military forces in the region, and that this deployment directly threatens China.

Compounding the tensions, the US and South Korea are currently holding their annual Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG) war exercises. UFG, one of the largest joint drills conducted between the two countries, includes 50,000 South Korean troops and 30,000 US soldiers. While described as “defensive” preparations for an attack by the North, these maneuvers are part of broader rehearsals by the US and its regional allies for war with China.

The drills were briefly halted on Thursday “in order to allow the US side to coordinate with the South Korean side on the exchange of artillery,” US Assistant Secretary of State David Shear said. Some 28,500 American personnel are permanently based in South

Korea. The Pentagon announced on Friday that they were placed on “enhanced” alert status.

The latest tensions were precipitated on August 4 when three landmines maimed two South Korean soldiers on a patrol along the southern side of the DMZ. While initially ruling out North Korean involvement, Seoul quickly changed its story, reporting on August 10 that Pyongyang was indeed responsible. The government pointed to fragments, supposedly from the wooden box landmines used by the North, discovered in the area of the blast, following a two-day, joint investigation between it and the US-led United Nations Command.

In response, Seoul resumed propaganda broadcasts across the border for the first time in 11 years, using large speakers that the North has threatened to destroy if not turned off. Pyongyang’s ultimatum gave Seoul 48 hours on Thursday to stop the broadcasts or it would undertake additional military measures.

While the rhetoric coming out of Pyongyang is nothing new, it is taking place in an increasingly tense international context. Within the framework of its “pivot” to Asia, launched in 2011, the US has systematically stepped up its military and economic pressure on North Korea, producing desperate reactions from the country’s Stalinist regime. The US and South Korea have seized upon each incident to further ramp up tensions, creating a dangerous situation that could escalate into open war.

Washington’s isolation of, and constant military threats against, North Korea reached a new level in 2013 when the US sent nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers to the peninsula in response to North Korea’s bombastic, but ultimately empty threats.

For years, Washington has rejected North Korea’s attempts to reach out and open a dialogue. Pyongyang would like nothing more than to integrate into the international capitalist market, offering the North Korean working class as a source of ultra-cheap labor. In 2013, it opened 14 special economic zones in an attempt to attract foreign businesses, but, without the backing of Washington, this plan failed.

All this US pressure has generated a deepening crisis and internal divisions within Pyongyang, exemplified by reports of purges and executions of top officials, including unverified claims by South Korea’s National Intelligence Service that Defense Minister Hyon Yong-

chol and Vice Premier Choe Yong-gon were executed earlier this year. Kim Jong-un’s uncle Jang Song-thaek, who had the backing of China, was executed in 2013.

Ultimately, the US efforts to destabilize and potentially collapse the North Korean regime are aimed at heightening its diplomatic pressure against, and military encirclement of, China, aimed at compelling Beijing to submit to Washington’s economic and strategic dictates in Asia.

The underlying conflict between the US and China dramatically amplifies the dangers of any military clash on the Korean Peninsula. The Chinese regime would view the prospect of the North’s military defeat and occupation as a direct threat to its own security and could, as it did in 1950 during the Korean War, deploy troops to confront South Korean and American forces.



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