

US flies B-52 strategic bomber close to Korean border

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In a step that can only dangerously boost tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the US Air Force yesterday flew a nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bomber low over South Korea's Osan Air Base south of Seoul. The B-52 was flanked by two fighters—one American and the other South Korean. Oban is just 77 kilometres from the fortified Demilitarised Zone separating North and South Korea and their large, heavily-armed militaries.

Admiral Harry Harris, head of the US Pacific Command, declared that the flight “was a demonstration of the ironclad US commitment to our allies in South Korea, in Japan, and to the defence of the American homeland.” He condemned North Korea's fourth nuclear test last week as “a blatant violation of its international obligations.”

Washington has seized on the latest North Korean test to accelerate the US military build-up in North East Asia, which is above all directed against China. Over the past five years, the US has been strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the region as part of its “pivot to Asia.” By 2020, the Pentagon plans to station 60 percent of its air and naval assets in the Asia Pacific, and this includes placing some of its most sophisticated weaponry at US bases in South Korea and Japan.

The immediate US military response to the latest nuclear test is a marked escalation from its reaction following North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, which in the first instance was to press for a harsh new round of UN sanctions. Behind the scenes at that time, however, the Pentagon, backed by the White House, drew up what came to be termed “the playbook”—a recipe for one provocation after another, supposedly to “reassure allies.”

In March 2013, when North Korea reacted to US-South Korean military exercises, the Pentagon put the

“playbook” into action, flying B-52 bombers on two occasions to South Korea, as well as advanced B-2 stealth bombers and F-22 Raptor fighters. The US also used the 2013 nuclear test to announce a long-planned expansion of its anti-ballistic missile system in the Asia Pacific, directed mainly against China, and to station two anti-missile destroyers off the Korean coast.

Sunday's B-52 flight came just four days after the fourth North Korean test. South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that the US was considering sending a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to waters off the Korean coast as part of joint exercises next month. Moreover, top US and South Korean officials have reportedly begun talks over positioning “strategic weapons”—that is, nuclear bombs—and their delivery systems on the Korean Peninsula.

In comments reported yesterday, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un justified the nuclear test as a “self-defensive step” to protect the region “from the danger of nuclear war caused by the US-led imperialists.” He is also conducting a tour of the country to celebrate the detonation of what Pyongyang claimed was a hydrogen bomb ahead of a convention of the ruling Workers' Party in May—the first since 1980.

In reality, the nuclear test will only heighten the danger of US-led provocations against North Korea. Any serious threat by Pyongyang to use its small arsenal of crude atomic weapons would be met with an immediate and devastating US response. The nuclear payload of a single B-52 bomber is sufficient to destroy much of North Korea's industrial and military infrastructure.

Furthermore, Kim Jong Un's boasting about North Korea's technological achievement and whipping up of nationalist and xenophobic sentiment, which is aimed at shoring up the unstable regime in Pyongyang and his

own position as top leader, can only divide North Korean workers from those in South Korea, Japan and around the world.

The real purpose of the nuclear test was not to defend North Korea against imperialism, but to reach an accommodation with it, particularly with Washington. An editorial yesterday in the official *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper reiterated Pyongyang's longstanding call for "a peace treaty between the DPRK [North Korea] and the United States." The regime regards its nuclear arsenal as the only means for pressing the US to formally end the decades-long confrontation that followed the 1950-53 Korean War.

In doing so, Pyongyang plays straight into the hands of Washington. Far from making concessions, the US and its allies are preparing another UN resolution that will deepen the country's diplomatic and economic isolation. A ban on North Korean ships entering ports around the world is one of the measures being mooted. At the same time, as well as taking military steps, US imperialism is exploiting the latest nuclear test to put pressure on China to rein in its North Korean ally.

While North Korea's latest test is certainly reckless, the chief destabilising factor in Asian and world politics is US imperialism, which is determined to use its military might to reverse its historic economic decline. The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" has turned the entire region into a dangerous tinderbox. It has deliberately inflamed longstanding flashpoints, such as the Korean Peninsula, and created new ones out of the maritime disputes in the East China and South China Seas between China and its neighbours.

Just last month, an American B-52 bomber flew within two nautical miles of a Chinese-administered reef in the South China Sea—that is, well within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit. The Pentagon later claimed the flight, which triggered alarm bells in the Chinese military and in Beijing, accidentally intruded close to the reef. Such "accidents" have the potential for unleashing a confrontation between nuclear-armed powers that could rapidly spiral out of control.

The potential for mistakes and miscalculations on the Korean Peninsula is, if anything, even greater. South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that the South Korean military has deployed missiles, artillery and other weapons systems to the Demilitarised Zone and restarted its propaganda broadcasts through huge

speaker systems that can be heard up to 24 kilometres inside North Korea. The South Korean political and media establishment is also directing a barrage of militarist propaganda against its own population to justify the preparations for war.

The volatile situation in North East Asia is just one indication of the explosive conditions around the world at the beginning of 2016 as a worsening global economic crisis compounds rising geo-political tensions and the danger of world war. The only means of halting the slide towards global conflagration is the building of an international anti-war movement of the working class based on socialist internationalism to put an end to the bankrupt capitalist system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.



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