

US officials press Trump to tackle North Korea

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Admiral Mike Mullen, former US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, declared in an American ABC interview on Sunday that President-elect Donald Trump would face a significant challenge “on day one” from North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. “That [Korean] peninsula is more likely than anyplace else in the world to potentially create an explosive outcome, particularly tied to the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un,” he warned.

Mullen’s remarks highlight the extremely volatile situation on the Korean Peninsula that has been created by the Bush and Obama administrations, which effectively sabotaged the deal reached through six-party talks to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear programs and weapons. Confronting a battery of economic sanctions, the Pyongyang regime has only exacerbated the danger of war with its bellicose statements and by conducting further nuclear and missile tests.

Mullen warned that the US would not tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea. “We’re going to get to the point where [Pyongyang] is going to be able to put a nuclear weapon on top of an intercontinental ballistic missile that could hit the United States, and that’s unacceptable,” he said.

The real concern in the US military establishment is not North Korea, whose military and industrial capacity Washington would obliterate if ever seriously threatened by nuclear attack by Pyongyang, but rather China. The Obama administration has exploited the “North Korean threat” to justify a far-reaching military build-up in Asia, including anti-ballistic missile systems whose primary use would be in a nuclear war with China.

Unlike Iran, Obama has repeatedly ruled out negotiations with North Korea to reach a deal on its nuclear program, unless all US demands were met in

advance. At the same time, Washington has pressured Beijing to tighten the economic noose around its ally Pyongyang, which threatens to precipitate the regime’s implosion—a situation that the US and its allies could exploit to install a pro-Western government.

After pointing out that the Bush and Obama administrations had failed to stop North Korea’s nuclear programs, Mullen suggested that more pressure had to be applied to China. “I think this has to go through Beijing,” he said, but criticised China for having “pushed back on that time after time.”

In fact, Beijing has just agreed to a new round of crippling economic sanctions on North Korea that are due to go to a vote in the UN Security Council on Friday. Reuters reported on Monday that China had agreed to slash its imports of coal from North Korea by some 60 percent, or an estimated \$700 million a year. Coal is North Korea’s largest single export item and China its only buyer. The UN resolution would also ban the export of copper, nickel, silver and zinc worth about \$100 million a year.

Mullen is not alone in pushing Trump to focus on North Korea. The *Wall Street Journal* last week reported the Obama administration had told Trump’s transition team that it considered Pyongyang to be the top national security priority for the incoming president. Current and former administration officials, it declared, worry that the pace of North Korea’s nuclear development, “demands a more aggressive strategy.”

Trump’s often incoherent and self-contradictory remarks on foreign policy during the election campaign cannot be taken at face value. His scanty comments on North Korea have veered this year from branding Kim Jong il as a “bad dude” and a “maniac” to saying “you have to give him credit” for taking on the country’s

“tough generals” in a bloody purge. “He wiped out the uncle. He wiped out this one, that one,” Trump exclaimed in admiration.

As far as policy is concerned, Trump suggested in May that he might talk with Kim. “Why not? What is wrong with talking?” he asked. “I won’t host a state dinner for him. The same goes for the Chinese and others who rip us off.” But, he indicated, a meeting “over a hamburger” might be acceptable. Trump has also suggested that he would use “economics” to strong-arm China into reining in North Korea.

While threatening to pull out of Japan and South Korea if those countries did not pay more for US military protection, Trump’s belligerent “America first” nationalism, threats of trade war against China and plans for a huge military expansion, particularly of the US navy, all point to a stepped-up war drive in Asia and around the world.

One of the frontrunners for the post of secretary of state in the Trump administration is former ambassador to the UN John Bolton, who was one of the most aggressive and militaristic of the Bush administration’s officials.

During a meeting in mid-November, Bolton told South Korean law makers there was a “zero” chance that the US would launch a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea. Such reassurances are worthless, however, given that the US and South Korean militaries are already rehearsing pre-emptive attacks on North Korean nuclear installations and “decapitation raids” on its leaders as part of OPLAN 5015 signed last November.

As reported by the Yonhap news agency, Bolton also ruled out any negotiations with Pyongyang—in line with his previous scathing criticisms of the six-party talks hosted by China and resulting agreements. The lack of any coherent policy on North Korea on the part of Trump and his advisers only heightens uncertainty and fears in South Korea, where President Park Geun-hy is enmeshed in a huge political crisis, and the region as a whole.

The *Wall Street Journal* article referred to above cited the remarks of Richard Haass, president of the Council of Foreign Relations, who said the new administration had “little time” to decide on a preferred strategy toward Pyongyang. He commented that without Beijing’s cooperation, “I see little reason to think a

combination of sanctions and diplomacy will deter North Korea.”

The newspaper suggested that Trump’s strategy “could ultimately be military” and warned: “Without at least an implicit agreement with China, military steps could trigger a security crisis in the region. US officials aren’t lost on the fact that the 1950–53 Korean War brought the US into direct military conflict with Beijing, which intervened to bolster Kim Jong Un’s grandfather, North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung.”

The danger of war is further heightened by Trump’s remarks during the election campaign proposing that Japan and South Korea develop their own nuclear weapons to defend themselves against North Korea, rather than depending on the US. Any moves by either country to build nuclear bombs would completely undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and trigger a nuclear arms race in Asia and internationally that would greatly exacerbate geo-political tensions and the risks of a nuclear catastrophe.



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