

US defence secretary threatens to shoot down any North Korean missile

Peter Symonds
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US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter declared on Sunday that North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs constituted a "serious threat" to the United States. He warned that the US military was prepared to shoot down any North Korean missile launched "if it were coming towards our territory or the territory of our friends and allies."

Carter's remarks came after an announcement by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on January 1 that his country was planning to test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that would potentially have the range to hit continental United States. Last Sunday, the North Korean foreign ministry declared that an ICBM would be launched "anytime and anywhere" as determined by "supreme headquarters."

The foreign ministry spokesman blamed the US for pushing North Korea toward developing an ICBM through "its anachronistic policy hostile toward the DPRK [North Korea] for decades." As in the past, Pyongyang is attempting to use the development of new weapons systems in a bid to break down the US-led diplomatic isolation and economic blockade of the country.

Washington is certainly responsible for repeatedly ratcheting up tensions with North Korea so as to justify its military build-up in East Asia and to pressure China. However, the Pyongyang regime's militaristic response only heightens the danger of war, sows divisions in the international working class and plays directly into the US's hands.

As Donald Trump prepares to assume the US presidency, the American and international media has been awash with commentary on how to disarm North Korea. Trump himself tweeted that a North Korean ICBM test "won't happen" but gave no indication as to how his administration intends to proceed.

Washington ~~Writings~~ ~~last~~ ~~weekend,~~

US Defence Secretary William Perry voiced concerns that Trump's tweet suggested "he might take military action against North Korea's missile program." After concluding that North Korea is likely to have an operational nuclear-armed ICBM within a few years, Perry called for negotiations, urging Trump to "talk first, get tough later." He concluded: "Time is of the essence. If we don't find a way—and soon—to freeze North Korea's quest for a nuclear ICBM, this crisis could all too easily spin out of control, leading to a second Korean War, far more devastating than the first."

Perry was part of the Clinton administration, which was on the brink of war with North Korea in 1994 over its nuclear programs, but pulled back at the last minute when advised by the US military of the enormous scale of likely casualties. Negotiations resulted in an Agreed Framework under which North Korea agreed to dismantle its nuclear program in return for two power reactors, the curtailment of sanctions and eventual diplomatic recognition. The US never kept its side of the bargain and the agreement was effectively scuttled by the Bush administration in 2001.

There is no indication, however, that Trump is prepared to negotiate with Pyongyang, other than a throw-away line suggesting a chat with North Korean leader Kim over a hamburger. Trump has on several occasions accused China of failing to do enough to rein in its ally North Korea through crippling economic sanctions. While agreeing to punitive UN sanctions on North Korea, Beijing has been reluctant to take action that could precipitate the collapse of the Pyongyang regime and create a crisis on China's northern border.

Carter's threat to shoot down any North Korean ICBM heading toward the US or an ally has been

placed in doubt by the latest annual report from the Pentagon's weapons testing office. As reported yesterday by *Bloomberg*, the network of radar-guided interceptors based in California and Alaska has demonstrated only a "limited capability to defend the US homeland" from small numbers of simple ICBMs. It stated that the "reliability and availability" of the operational interceptors was also low, as new flaws and "failure modes" were exposed during testing.

The question mark over the US anti-ballistic missile systems has already led to calls for pre-emptive military action against North Korean nuclear and missile facilities. Speaking at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) last month, General Walter Sharp, former head of US Forces Korea, declared that the US had to demonstrate the capability to destroy North Korean missiles both on the ground before they were launched, and after launch. Any North Korean retaliation, Sharp suggested, should be met with an overwhelming military attack. "We have to make sure... he [Kim] knows that if he responds after we take one of his missiles out that there is a lot more coming his way."

The US and South Korean militaries have adopted a joint operational plan—OPLAN 5015—in the event of war with North Korea. The plan shifted from a nominally defensive stance to an offensive one. Agreed in November 2015, the plan reportedly includes pre-emptive strikes on North Korea's nuclear and missile sites, as well as "decapitation" raids by special forces units to assassinate key figures in the Pyongyang regime, including the top leader Kim.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported on Sunday that the formation of a specialised assassination brigade of 1,000 to 2,000 US and South Korean special forces troops would be speeded up. Originally slated for 2019, its establishment has been brought forward to "sometime later this year," according to a high-ranking government official. The unit would operate inside North Korea in a time of war to eliminate leaders and paralyse the regime.

Having declared that a North Korean ICBM "won't happen," Trump, the right-wing populist and braggard, is now on the brink of assuming office and putting words into actions. His propensity for recklessness and militarism will only heighten the danger that tensions on the Korean Peninsula, one of the world's most

dangerous flash points, will spiral out of control and lead to a conflict that will drag in other powers.



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