

US defence secretary threatens North Korea with “overwhelming” force

Peter Symonds
4 February 2017

US Defence Secretary James Mattis, who is currently touring North East Asia, warned North Korea yesterday that any attack on the United States and its allies would be defeated. And any use of nuclear weapons would be met with an “effective and overwhelming” response.

This bellicose threat only has one meaning: the obliteration of the North Korean regime, as well as its military, industry and infrastructure, with the loss of countless lives. It is a message that is aimed not only at North Korea, but also China, Pyongyang’s only ally and economic lifeline.

In the first instance, Mattis’s comments were aimed at reassuring South Korea and Japan. During last year’s presidential election campaign, President Trump threatened to walk away from the US alliances with Japan and South Korea if they did not pay a far greater share of the costs of the extensive American military bases in their countries.

On his flight to South Korea, Mattis declared that the alliance between the two countries was “enduring.” He met with South Korea’s acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn on Thursday and pledged that the US intended to stand “shoulder to shoulder” against any North Korean threat. After meeting with the US defence secretary on Friday, South Korean Defence Minister Han Mikoo welcomed Mattis’s threat to North Korea as evidence of the allies’ close military cooperation.

For all the public reassurances, Mattis is likely to have discussed South Korea paying a greater share of the ongoing costs and restructuring of US military bases. The Pentagon has been engaged in a major reorganisation of its presence in South Korea as part of the Obama administration’s military build-up throughout the region in preparation for war with China. The US has some 28,500 military personnel in the country.

Mattis’s immediate priority was to secure the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) battery to South Korea. The South Korean government, under pressure from the Obama administration, agreed last year to install the sophisticated anti-ballistic missile system despite widespread local opposition.

Mattis repeated the claim that the THAAD battery in South Korea, part of an extensive and growing anti-missile system in Asia, is aimed against North Korea. “If it were not for the provocative behaviour of North Korea, we would have no need for THAAD out here,” he said.

The prime target of the US anti-missile network is not North Korea, but China, which has protested against the planned THAAD installation in South Korea. The THAAD system, which is capable of shooting down nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, is not primarily for defence, but to neutralise China’s ability to retaliate in the event of a US first nuclear strike.

Mattis and his South Korean counterpart announced that the THAAD system would be deployed by the end of 2017. The South Korean government, however, is mired in political crisis after the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. Her future is now in the hands of the Constitutional Court. If she is removed from office, a fresh presidential election will be held.

South Korean opposition parties have no opposition in principle to the THAAD deployment but are seeking to capitalise on mounting public opposition. The *Los Angeles Times* reported: “A large group gathered in a central square [in Seoul] Thursday to protest Mattis’ arrival. One held a sign that read, ‘Mad Dog’ Mattis—Not Welcome in Korea.’ More protesters were expected Friday.”

“Mad Dog” Mattis is a former Marine general and

head of US Central Command notorious for his murderous language and methods in the Middle East. The fact that he chose to make his first overseas trip as defence secretary to North East Asia is another sign that the Trump administration has put a confrontation with China at the top of its agenda.

Trump's threats of trade war measures have gone hand-in-hand with bellicose statements on China's activities in the South China Sea and North Korea. Trump has repeatedly accused Beijing of failing to use its economic muscle to force Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear weapons and programs.

Trump responded last month to North Korea's claims that it was preparing to test an intercontinental ballistic missile by flatly declaring that it "won't happen." While he gave no indication how the US would prevent such a test, the implication was that the North Korean missile would either be destroyed on the ground or shot out of the sky by an anti-missile system.

Trump's belligerent comments toward North Korea coincide with a debate in US foreign policy and military circles over the danger that Pyongyang will soon have nuclear-armed missiles. Patrick Cronin, from the Centre for a New American Security, told the *Washington Post* that North Korea was "on the cusp of being able to demonstrate and deploy all the sinews of a nuclear-weapon state."

Prior to Mattis's trip, Joint Chiefs Chairman General Joseph Dunford spoke by phone with his South Korean counterpart to discuss the "acute security situation" posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. The two reaffirmed the strong commitment of the two countries to building up a joint defence posture.

Under the Obama administration, the US and South Korean militaries agreed to new joint operational plans—OPLAN 5015—that shifted from a defensive posture in the event of a war with North Korea to an offensive one, including pre-emptive strikes on North Korean missiles and nuclear weapons and "decapitation" raids on the Pyongyang regime.

In an article this week in the *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Dunford indicated that any war with North Korea would not be limited to the Korean Peninsula. "Today, North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile, cyber, and space capabilities could quickly threaten the homeland and our allies in the Asia-Pacific region," he wrote.

"Deterring and, if necessary, defeating a threat from North Korea requires the Joint Force to be capable of nearly instant integration across regions, domains and functions," Dunford stated.

These comments make clear that the Pentagon is preparing for a conflict that would rapidly draw other powers, including China, into a new world war that would range across the globe and into outer space.

Mattis left South Korea last night for further talks in Japan over the weekend.



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