

US drumbeat for action against North Korea

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Less than a month into the Trump presidency, North Korea is looming as a major flashpoint after the Pyongyang regime test fired a new intermediate-range ballistic missile on Sunday. The test takes place amid mounting tensions between the US and China, North Korea's ally, over trade, monetary policy, Taiwan and territorial disputes in the South China and East China seas.

The launch drew immediate condemnation by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was visiting with Trump at the president's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. At a joint press conference Sunday night, Abe called the missile test "absolutely intolerable." Trump declared that the US was "behind Japan, its great ally, 100 percent." The US, Japan and South Korea have called an emergency session of the UN Security Council to discuss North Korea.

Trump has come under pressure from sections of the American media and political establishment to take more aggressive action against North Korea. Much of the press is portraying the missile firing as a major test of the new administration, as indicated by headlines such as "North Korea first ballistic missile, challenging Trump" (*New York Times*), "North Korea missile launch sets test for Trump" (*Wall Street Journal*), and "North Korean nuclear ambitions to be defining issue for Trump" (*Bloomberg*).

The focus on North Korea, which carried out 24 missile launches and two nuclear tests last year, reflects intense discussions and conflicts within the American foreign policy and military establishment over the past six months. A major concern is that North Korea is within striking distance of building an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of launching a nuclear strike against continental United States.

President Obama, in briefing then-President-elect Trump on security issues, reportedly advised that North Korea be placed at the top of the new administration's

agenda. Obama's own policy towards North Korea, punitive sanctions plus pressure on China to strong-arm Pyongyang into denuclearising, referred to as "strategic patience," has been heavily criticised as ineffective.

Trump has reacted belligerently to North Korea. When North Korean leader Kim Jong-un announced at the beginning of the year that his regime was preparing to test an ICBM, Trump tweeted: "It won't happen." He also lashed out at China for failing to force its ally into line.

Yesterday, during a media conference with the Canadian prime minister, Trump declared that he would deal "very strongly" with North Korea, which he described as a "big, big problem." His administration is currently conducting a review of US policy towards the country, which, in line with Trump's militarist orientation, will likely shift toward a more reckless and provocative use of force, along with efforts to destabilise the Pyongyang regime.

Any US move against North Korea is also aimed against China. Coming on top of the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot to Asia" against Beijing, the Trump administration has already made clear that it regards China as the chief threat to US dominance in Asia and internationally.

The concern in American ruling circles is that time is running out to counter the historic decline of the United States and the rise of China. Writing in the January/February issue of the *National Interest*, Bush administration official Evan Feigenbaum declared that Trump faced "a tougher challenge with Beijing than have his eight predecessors" since Nixon's rapprochement with Beijing in 1972.

"China is now weightier, more influential around the world, better able to resist or retaliate against US pressure, and has more tools of economic statecraft and military power than ever before. This means that Washington needs to move from reactive to activist in

its approach to both China and Asia,” Feigenbaum advised.

Already, Trump has gone on the offensive against Beijing, warning of trade war measures, threatening to dump the “One China” policy—the bedrock of US-China diplomatic relations—and reaffirming that the US would back Japan in a war with China over disputed outcrops in the East China Sea. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has declared that the US will block Chinese access to its islets in the South China Sea, a move that would constitute an act of war.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis has issued a chilling warning to Pyongyang, declaring that any North Korean use of nuclear weapons against the US or its allies would be met by an “effective and overwhelming response.” The statement not only underlines the vastly superior American military might, which could obliterate the North Korea regime and its military and industrial capacity, but also Washington’s willingness to use it in a catastrophic war that would inevitably draw in other powers, particularly China.

The response of the autocratic, ultra-nationalist North Korean regime to US threats is utterly reactionary. On the one hand, Pyongyang pleads for US imperialism to end its decades-long isolation and economic blockade so as to integrate the country as a cheap labour platform in the global economy. On the other, its bellicose statements and striving for nuclear arms only heighten the danger of war and drive a wedge between the working class in North Korea and its class brothers and sisters in South Korea, Japan, the United States and around the world.

Likewise, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime veers between seeking a deal with Washington and engaging in a major military expansion and its own muscle-flexing. The CCP does not represent the working class, but the ultra-rich oligarchy that has been spawned by capitalist restoration since 1978.

In response to the US military build-up in Asia, China has transformed several of its islets in the South China Sea into potential military bases and matched the Pentagon’s provocative military exercises in the area with its own. China continues to engage in dangerous encounters with the Japanese military and coast guard around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Moreover, while concerned about the potential for a nuclear-armed North Korea to trigger an arms race in

North East Asia, Beijing has done little to curb Pyongyang.

All of this feeds into the increasingly perilous and unpredictable situation being fuelled globally and especially in Asia by the installation of President Trump. His administration is already rent by divisions over foreign policy, reflecting the broader crisis of the American political establishment at home and abroad. Amid deepening political opposition to his regressive domestic politics, Trump’s “America First” demagoguery is aimed at turning social tensions outward against an external enemy, compounding the danger that a relatively minor incident could trigger a major conflagration.

The mounting danger of world war can be confronted only on the basis of recognising that it is rooted in the insoluble crisis of the capitalist system, which once again, as in the 1930s, is fuelling national antagonisms and the growth of militarism. The answer to capitalist crisis and war is socialist revolution. The only force capable of carrying out that task is the international working class, mobilized against both the imperialist ruling elites and reactionary bourgeois regimes such as those in Pyongyang and Beijing.



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