

Trump administration considers military strike against North Korea

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The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Wednesday that the Trump administration is considering military attacks and regime-change operations against North Korea as part of a review of US strategy regarding the small, isolated state. Any aggressive US action toward the Pyongyang regime threatens to provoke retaliation that could plunge the Korean Peninsula into conflict.

According to the *Journal*, Trump's deputy national security adviser K.T. McFarland initiated the "comprehensive rethink" two weeks ago at a meeting of national security officials. She asked for proposals on North Korea, including those described by one official as "well outside the mainstream." Her request was for all options to be considered, including military action.

The leaked details are another indication that the Trump administration is making North Korea a top priority. During a dinner earlier this week with select journalists, Trump branded North Korea as "a world menace" and declared it had "to be dealt with soon." A senior administration official told the media on Tuesday that North Korea and its nuclear program were the "greatest immediate threat" to the US.

The White House focus on Pyongyang is part of its far broader and reckless preparations for a confrontation with China, North Korea's ally, aimed at arresting the historic decline of US imperialism. Trump has threatened trade war measures against Beijing, military action over Chinese islets in the South China Sea, and renunciation of the "One China" policy that has underpinned US-China relations for nearly four decades.

North Korea's own actions in expanding its nuclear and missile programs have nothing to do with defending the North Korean people. They have been aimed from the outset at securing an end to the decades-

long US blockade of the country and its integration into global capitalism. Pyongyang's nationalist ideology and bloodcurdling threats are utterly reactionary, dividing North Korean workers from those in the South, Japan, the US and internationally, while providing the US with a pretext for its military expansion in North East Asia.

The US and South Korean militaries have just begun two months of annual war games involving more than 300,000 troops, along with a US aircraft carrier strike group, sophisticated F-35B stealth fighters and possibly nuclear-capable B-52 or B-1B strategic bombers.

South Korea also came one step closer this week to installing a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery on its soil after acquiring land for its installation. Beijing is bitterly opposed to a THAAD battery placement in South Korea, which is part of the Pentagon's wider deployment of anti-missile systems in Asia in preparation for a war with China.

The *Wall Street Journal* indicated that one purpose of military threats against Pyongyang could be to force Beijing to cripple the North Korean economy, either to compel North Korea to accede to US demands or bring about regime change. "The heightened prospect of US military action in North Korea could encourage China ... to take steps Washington has long sought to choke off Pyongyang's economic lifeline," it said.

Beijing has already agreed to tough UN economic sanctions against Pyongyang and last month suspended imports of coal—North Korea's largest export item. However, China is wary about provoking a crisis that could lead to a collapse of the Pyongyang regime and the integration of the Korean Peninsula under Washington's aegis.

The *Journal* also reported that US officials have

already raised with allies the prospect of military action against North Korea. During Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the US last month, "US officials on several occasions stated that all options were under consideration to deal with North Korea." The Japanese side found the scenario "worrisome"—given that Japan could be a target for North Korean retaliation.

The White House deliberations on regime change and military action are not simply a ploy to put pressure on China, however. Before Trump's inauguration, a discussion was already well under way in top American foreign policy and military circles over the "failure" of the Obama administration's "strategic patience" toward Pyongyang. The policy was hardly patient: the US responded to North Korean nuclear tests with harsher sanctions and refused to negotiate with Pyongyang prior to it meeting US demands for disarmament.

Since North Korea's fifth nuclear test last September, a mounting chorus of US officials has called for preemptive military strikes against Pyongyang, ostensibly to prevent it developing an international continental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the US mainland.

Last October and November respectively, former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen and General Walter Sharp, former commander of US forces in South Korea, suggested that the US had to preemptively destroy any ICBM on its launch pad. In December, Senator Lindsey Graham announced he would introduce legislation to authorise the president to conduct such strikes.

As president-elect, Trump in early January tweeted that "won't happen," in response to an announcement by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un that the country was in final stages of preparing to test an ICBM. The implication was that the Trump administration would use military force to destroy the missile.

A number of analysts have warned that military action could quickly spiral out of control, leading to very high casualties on the Korean Peninsula and drawing in other powers, such as China. Bruce Klingner, a commentator with the right-wing Heritage Foundation, last month urged caution, saying a preemptive attack could "trigger an all-out war with nuclear-armed North Korea." He noted that Pyongyang has a million-man army just across the de-militarised

zone from South Korea and enough artillery in place to devastate Seoul.

While the Trump administration's review of US strategy on North Korea has not ruled out negotiations with Pyongyang, this is the least likely option. The White House recently blocked "back channel" discussions between North Korean officials and US academics and former officials. It is also being urged to reinstate North Korea on the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism—a move that would, in all probability, end the prospect of talks.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the White House review completed its first phase on Tuesday. The proposals are now to be refined for presentation to Trump, who is under growing political pressure to take action against North Korea.



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