

North Korea tests missiles amid huge US-South Korean war games

Peter Symonds
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North Korea yesterday launched at least four ballistic missiles from its west coast, not far from the border with China, at around 7.30 a.m. local time. The missiles flew about 1,000 kilometres and, according to Japanese officials, three splashed down within Japan's exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles or about 370 kilometres.

The missile launch took place amid heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula as the US and South Korean militaries started their annual Foal Eagle war games. The joint exercises over the next two months reportedly involve at least 320,000 South Korean and American military personnel backed by a US aircraft carrier and its strike group, and advanced US fighters and bombers.

Pyongyang last week branded the drills as preparations for nuclear war and warned that “new types of strategic weapons will soar” if the Foal Eagle drills proceeded. David Wright from the Union of Concerned Scientists suggested to the *Washington Post* that the missiles were either of the extended-range Scuds or medium-range Nodong type, which have been tested before, indicating other missile tests could be pending.

North Korea's militarist response to the threats posed by US imperialism and its allies is utterly reactionary and plays directly into Washington's hands by providing a pretext for the expansion of US forces in Asia—directed against Pyongyang and Beijing. Far from defending the North Korean people, the regime's bellicose and nationalistic posturing sows divisions between workers in North Korea and South Korea, Japan, the US and internationally.

The US nuclear arsenal is capable of obliterating North Korea's military machine and industrial infrastructure many times over. Last week the US

defence secretary repeated the threat of an “effective and overwhelming” response if Pyongyang ever attempted to use its nuclear weapons.

The US and its allies immediately condemned yesterday's missile tests by North Korea. Acting South Korean president Hwang Kyo-ahn branded the launch as “a direct challenge and grave provocation.” Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe declared that the tests demonstrated that Pyongyang had developed “a new threat” and said Tokyo would “strongly protest to North Korea.”

The US and Japan have called for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to discuss the latest missile tests. A similar session was convened following North Korea's launch of a new medium-range missile last month, but no punitive measures were taken. Washington will undoubtedly exploit the gathering to intensify the pressure on Beijing to impose crippling economic measures on its North Korean ally.

The North Korean missile launches take place as the Trump administration is engaged in a review of US strategy towards North Korea, which, since the end of the Korean War in 1953, has been one of unrelenting hostility. The Obama administration has been heavily criticised in US foreign policy and military circles for not taking more aggressive action to halt the North Korean nuclear and missile programs.

In January, Trump, as president-elect, reacted to an announcement by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un that his country was preparing to test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) by tweeting that it “won't happen.” Details of the White House review leaked to the *Wall Street Journal* last week indicated that regime-change and pre-emptive military strikes against North Korea were under active consideration.

In a detailed article last weekend, the *New York Times* revealed that the US military under the Obama administration had engaged in an aggressive cyberwarfare campaign against North Korea's missile systems following its nuclear test in 2013. The newspaper admitted that it had withheld details at the request of the military and security establishment. It was publishing the story now as it was becoming evident that North Korea had become aware of the cyber-attacks that appeared to be causing a high rate of missile launch failures.

The American cyber and electronic strikes against North Korea are a reckless act of war, which threaten to plunge the region into conflict. They recall the methods used by the US and Israel against Iran to undermine its uranium enrichment capabilities using the Stuxnet worm to cause gas centrifuges to malfunction. The cyber-attack was part of a broader Israeli campaign of assassination and sabotage against Iran's nuclear programs.

The *New York Times* explained that Obama was prepared to go to any length in his efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. "With only a few months left in office," it wrote, "he pushed aides for new approaches. At one meeting, he declared that he would have targeted the North Korean leadership and weapons sites if he thought that would work." The administration concluded, however, that the difficulties of military strikes were too great, and "the risks of missing were tremendous, including renewed war on the Korean Peninsula."

The Trump administration is now considering all options in its bid to prevent North Korea from building a nuclear-tipped ICBM capable of reaching the US mainland. Its measures will not be aimed just at Pyongyang but also Beijing, which Trump has repeatedly threatened with trade war measures and military action in the South China Sea. He is accelerating the military build-up in Asia in preparation for war with China in a bid to ensure US supremacy in the region and the world.

A senior Trump official confirmed to the *New York Times* that the White House was looking at "pre-emptive military strike options," in spite of the tactical difficulties involved. "Putting American tactical nuclear weapons back in South Korea—they were withdrawn a quarter-century ago—is also under

consideration even if that step ~~could~~ ^{would} accelerate an arms race with the North," the newspaper stated.

The reinstallation of US tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula would threaten to dramatically raise tensions not only with North Korea, but also with China, which would quickly conclude that it was the real target. It could trigger a nuclear arms race involving South Korea, where some lawmakers have already called for building nuclear weapons, and Japan.

While Trump has also reportedly considered renewed negotiations with the Pyongyang regime, the White House is under growing pressure to act against North Korea. The danger that it will opt for militarist measures, including an attack on North Korea, is heightened by the political warfare in American ruling circles over foreign policy in relation to Russia in particular. As it attempts to extricate itself from a worsening crisis, the Trump administration is quite capable of initiating a reckless provocation against North Korea as a diversion.



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