

US threatens more sanctions, military build-up against North Korea

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22 March 2017

In the wake of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's trip to China, the US is focussing mounting pressure on China to force North Korea to bow to Washington's demands to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. In the background, as Tillerson stated last week, all options, including military action against Pyongyang, are under consideration.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer told the media on Monday the administration continued "to urge China to step in and play a larger role in deterring both the ballistic and other missile threats that North Korea plays... The president and the secretary of state have an expectation that China employed [sic] multiple points of pressure on North Korea."

Spicer's comments came as a senior US official told Reuters the Trump administration was, as part of its review of American strategy toward Pyongyang, contemplating sweeping sanctions aimed at cutting North Korea off from the global financial system. The sanctions would go hand in hand with a military build-up by the US and its allies, Japan and South Korea.

The unnamed administration official said Tillerson privately warned Chinese leaders the US was preparing broader "secondary sanctions" that would target banks and other companies doing business with North Korea, most of which are Chinese. Washington has repeatedly accused China of not doing enough to implement UN sanctions by using its muscle as North Korea's top trading partner.

Another US government source told Reuters the Trump administration could also opt to escalate cyber attacks and other covert action aimed at undermining North Korea's leadership. The *New York Times* has already reported that the Obama administration mounted cyber attacks on North Korean missile systems. The first official said none of the options were

"stand-alones," adding: "It's going to be some form of 'all of the above,' probably excluding military action."

During his trip to Asia, Tillerson told a reporter from the right-wing *Independent Journal Review* that the administration would adopt a "staged approach" to give the North Korean government time to "make decisions and adjust... It's not our objective to force them into some brash action." No one should place any faith in such reassurances. Crippling economic sanctions, cyber attacks and regime-change intrigues, not to speak of repeated threats of military attack, are all provocative actions that deliberately raise tensions and risk retaliation.

The Trump administration's recklessness is underscored by Tillerson's suggestion to the *Independent Journal Review* that the US could encourage Japan to develop its own nuclear weapons—a move that would lead to a dangerous nuclear arms race in Asia. Asked whether this option was under consideration, Tillerson repeated that "all options are on the table," adding: "We think it's important that everyone in the region has a clear understanding that circumstances could evolve to the point that for mutual deterrence reasons, we might have to consider that."

According to Reuters' sources, the Trump administration is in the final stages of working out its North Korean strategy. "The policy recommendations being assembled by President Donald Trump's national security adviser, H. R. McMaster, are expected to reach the president's desk within weeks, possibly before a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in early April... North Korea is expected to top the agenda at that meeting," Reuters reported.

A rising drum beat against North Korea in the American and international media is setting the stage for rash and provocative US action. Speculation is rife

that Trump, who previously declared that “unpredictability” would be a watchword of his foreign policy, could authorise some form of military action.

Speaking to Fox News last Sunday, House Intelligence Committee chairman Devin Nunes threw his weight behind military strikes against North Korea. “The closer that the North Korean regime gets to being able to deliver a nuclear weapon... we’re going to have to be in a position to take some type of pre-emptive strike,” he said. “At the end of the day here, something may have to be done because we can’t afford to let a nuclear weapon go off in Seoul or Tokyo or the United States for that matter.”

International Atomic Energy Agency head Yukiya Amano added further fuel to the mounting confrontation. Supposedly based on satellite imagery, he claimed that North Korea had doubled the size of its uranium enrichment facility. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, he downplayed the possibility of a negotiated agreement akin to that reached with Iran. “This is a highly political issue,” he said. “A political agreement is essential. We can’t be optimistic. The situation is very bad.”

The growing concern in world capitals about the danger of war in North East Asia provoked by a US attack on North Korea was expressed in a *Financial Times* comment on Monday by columnist Gideon Rachman, entitled “Bombing North Korea is not an option.” He declared: “The idea of bombing the North Korean nuclear program is dangerous folly. For the past 20 years, the US has repeatedly considered the idea and repeatedly dismissed it—for good reason.”

Rachman pointed to the very real danger of an escalating war that would claim millions of lives on the Korean Peninsula and Japan, where the US has large military bases. “It could also draw in China, which is both a neighbour and a formal treaty ally of North Korea,” he warned. “It is worth remembering that the last time American and Chinese troops fought each other was on the Korean peninsula in the 1950s.”

The North Korean regime’s belligerent response to mounting US threats is reactionary and plays directly into the hands of the Trump administration. Pyongyang released a video this week showing a US aircraft carrier being consumed by computer-generated balls of fire, with a commentary declaring that North Korean missiles will be “stabbed into the throat of the carrier.”

A North Korean foreign ministry spokesman issued a statement on Monday saying it would continue to develop its nuclear weapons, describing them as “the most reliable war deterrence to defend the socialist motherland and the life of its people.” These remarks are false on every level: the oppressive Stalinist regime, mired in Korean chauvinism, has nothing to do with socialism and its blood-curdling rhetoric divides North Korean workers from those in South Korea, Japan and internationally.

Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons, far from protecting the North Korean people, only heighten the danger of war. Last month, US Defence Secretary James Mattis warned that any use of nuclear weapons by North Korea would be met with an “effective and overwhelming” response. A single US strategic bomber is capable of delivering enough nuclear weapons to obliterate most of North Korea’s military and industrial capacity.

The Associated Press yesterday cited US military officials as saying that increased American surveillance of North Korea had revealed signs it was preparing to test another missile in the coming days. Such a move would intensify the clamour in Washington for action against Pyongyang. At the time of posting, the media is reporting sketchy US and South Korean claims of a failed North Korean missile launch this morning. If true, it will intensify the clamour in Washington for action against Pyongyang.



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