

China fears US military attack on North Korea

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Amid mounting tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the Chinese state-owned *Global Times* has warned of the rising danger of US attacks on North Korea in the wake of the Trump administration's cruise missile strikes on Syria. An editorial entitled "After Syria strikes, will North Korea be next?" appeared in the wake of the Pentagon's redirection of the aircraft carrier strike group led by the USS Carl Vinson to waters off the Korean Peninsula.

"Emboldened by its success in Syria," the newspaper stated, "Washington will probably become more impatient with Pyongyang's provocations. Destroying North Korea's nuclear facilities with air raids is not considered an absurd idea by the Trump team any more, but is a serious option that is frequently talked about."

The Trump administration has finalised a full review of US strategy toward North Korea. According to an NBC report last Friday, the options now under active consideration include returning US nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, "decapitation raids" to kill North Korean leaders and covert military action to sabotage North Korean nuclear and military installations.

Trump's national security adviser H.R. McMaster told *Fox News* on Sunday the US president had asked to be given "a full range of options" to remove the threat posed by North Korea. McMaster declared it "prudent" to redirect the Carl Vinson amid speculation that North Korea could stage a missile or nuclear test to coincide with this week's birthday of the country's late founding leader, Kim Il-sung.

The *Global Times* editorial, reflecting fears in the Chinese leadership, warned that any US strike on North Korea was "unlikely to be limited to nuclear facilities and related military infrastructure" and could provoke devastating retaliation on US ally, South Korea. "Thus,

a military strike on the North will very likely evolve into large-scale bloody war on the Peninsula."

According to an unconfirmed report by the South Korean Chosun news agency, the Chinese military has moved 150,000 troops to the border with North Korea to prepare for "unforeseen circumstances." The units reportedly include medical and support units to train for an influx of North Korean refugees. The report was denied by the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry, and the US Defence Department told the *Daily Caller* there was "no evidence" of significant troop movements along the Chinese-North Korean border.

Nevertheless, the Chinese government is nervous about the prospect of US military action against North Korea triggering an all-out war in its backyard. In talks between Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Donald Trump last weekend, North Korea was high on the agenda. Trump effectively delivered an ultimatum to Xi to force Pyongyang to accept US demands or face the prospect of US strikes on North Korea. The fact that Trump authorised the US strikes on Syria in the midst of his meetings with Xi underscored the threat.

Beijing is caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, it has opposed North Korean missile and nuclear tests, which provide the US with a pretext for its military build-up in North East Asia. On the other, it does not want a collapse of the Pyongyang regime that could lead to a pro-US ally on its doorstep. China continues to call for negotiations, which the Trump administration has rejected unless its demands are met.

In comments to the *Global Times*, Lu Chao, from the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences, said: "The US needs to take many things into consideration if it plans to launch a military attack on North Korea, especially whether its allies Japan and South Korea will fully cooperate and how Russia and China will respond.

Otherwise, it will lead to unbearable consequences.”

The prospect of a US military attack on North Korea is also prompting concern in capitals around the world. Speaking on Radio 4’s “Today” program, the ex-chief of British intelligence M-I6 branch John Sawyers warned: “If you are looking for a world crisis which could bring about the dangers of a clash between great powers, then North Korea is a bigger concern than Syria.

“The move by the Americans to strengthen their forces in the Korean Peninsula, the demonstration to President Xi in Florida that the US was willing to use force against another state,” he said. “I think this is all part of a calculation that North Korea has to be treated very seriously, a very high priority and ultimately needs a joint US-Chinese approach to deal with this unless we are to avoid a further conflict on the peninsula.”

Sawyers added: “I think what the Chinese are beginning to understand is that if this can’t be solved peaceably through negotiations, through pressure, then there is a serious risk that the US will have only one option left, which is the military option.”

Beijing’s ability to apply pressure to Pyongyang, short of imposing crippling sanctions such as the cut off of oil supplies, is limited. China has already agreed to UN resolutions that impose heavy economic sanctions on North Korea and announced in February that it was suspending coal imports from its neighbour. China is by far North Korea’s largest trading partner and Chinese sanctions on North Korea have already provoked a sharp deterioration of relations between the two countries.

Whether the Trump administration will wait for China to bully North Korea into submission is unknown. The White House has already held discussions with its closest allies—Japan, South Korea and Australia—about the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The presence of the USS Carl Vinson and its strike group in adjacent waters is just the most obvious indication that the US military is being primed for an attack.

The *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney reported today that “Australia and its allies have been put on standby for the possibility of the United States shooting down test rockets launched by North Korea.” Citing intelligence sources, it suggested that such a test might occur on April 15, Kim Il-sung’s birthday, or sooner.

Australian newspaper said the US “is understood to have notified Australia that it is fully prepared to shoot down these rockets. The Australian-United States joint facility at Pine Gap monitors North Korean missile launches, and is on standby.” The Pine Gap spy base in central Australia provides intelligence and targeting information to the US war machine for a broad sweep of the globe from the Middle East to North East Asia.



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