

US continues dangerous brinkmanship with North Korea

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In Tokyo yesterday, US Vice President Mike Pence continued the Trump administration's reckless brinkmanship with North Korea while seeking to reassure nervous allies in Asia that the dangerous confrontation could be ended without war. His remarks come amid a relentless drum beat in the American and international media vilifying the North Korean regime.

Pence reiterated his statements in South Korea on Monday that "the era of strategic patience is over" and "all options are on the table." In other words, the US is willing to use all means, including military force, to end North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

South Korea and Japan, both of which house large US military bases, could be the target of North Korean missiles in the event of war. In addition, the South Korean capital of Seoul—a city of 10 million people—lies within the range of North Korean artillery emplacements near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the two countries.

Pence told the media Trump was "determined to work closely with Japan, with South Korea, with all our allies in the region and with China to achieve a peaceable resolution and the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula." A Japanese government spokesman repeated the refrain that Pence and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe agreed that China needed to play a greater role in dealing with North Korea.

The Trump administration is applying huge pressure on Beijing—not least through threats of initiating a war on its doorstep—to force Pyongyang to bow to Washington's demands. However, Trump has already declared that if China cannot "solve North Korea," the US is prepared to go it alone through other, namely military, means.

In comments to Fox News yesterday, Trump was openly sceptical that the stand-off with North Korea

would be resolved through diplomatic means. "I hope things work out well. I hope there's going to be peace. But you know, they've been talking with this gentleman [North Korean leader Kim Jong-un] for a long time ... everybody's been outplayed."

The US president again declared he would keep the world in the dark as to the measures the US would take. "I don't want to telegraph what I'm doing or what I'm thinking ... we'll see what happens," he said. Asked what would happen if North Korea tested another missile, he simply replied: "We'll find out."

Trump's remarks take on a particularly menacing character following the US cruise missile strikes on Syria and its use of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb in Afghanistan last week. In South Korea, Pence cited the US attacks in Syria and Afghanistan in his warning to North Korea not to test the resolve of the United States.

Since coming to office, the Trump administration has conducted a review of US strategy toward North Korea that called for a full range of options. As well as military attacks, the options leaked to the media include a return of US nuclear weapons to South Korea, sabotage by special forces inside North Korea and "decapitation strikes" to kill North Korean leaders.

By keeping the world guessing as to what the US will do, Trump has added a great deal of uncertainty and instability into an already precarious situation, heightening the danger of miscalculation or mistakes triggering a conflict.

That was further compounded by misinformation from the White House and Pentagon last week that an aircraft carrier strike group headed by the USS Carl Vinson had been ordered to waters off the Korean Peninsula to coincide with a possible North Korean missile or nuclear test last Saturday. In fact, the

warships took part in joint exercises in the Indian Ocean with the Australian navy.

The USS Carl Vinson and its accompanying guided-missile destroyers and cruiser are now due to arrive next week during possible North Korean tests marking Military Foundation Day on April 25. Citing a government official, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that the Pentagon was sending two other US aircraft carriers for joint exercises with the South Korean navy.

Extensive US-South Korean air drills are currently underway and will continue into next week. Some 1,500 US and South Korean military personnel are taking part in the Max Thunder exercise, along with a host of warplanes, including F-16 fighters, AV-8B Harriers, EA-18G Growlers, transport aircraft and helicopters. The South Korean and US militaries have just completed their annual Foal Eagle war games—involving some 320,000 troops—that are preparations for war with North Korea.

The *Guardian* reported yesterday that the Pentagon is actively considering shooting down a North Korean test missile—an act of war that could trigger retaliation against the US or its allies, particularly South Korea. A US official told the newspaper that the prospective shoot-down strategy could occur after a nuclear test, to send a signal to Pyongyang that the US can impose military consequences for a step Trump has declared unacceptable.

Also yesterday, CNN reported that the US military is preparing tests of its anti-missile systems in May. A land-based and a ship-based test will take place in the Pacific region, sending a further warning to North Korea about US military capacities.

While the Trump administration has repeatedly called on China to deal with North Korea, Beijing's ability to force Pyongyang to accede to Washington's demands is limited. The Chinese government has already imposed sanctions on North Korea in a bid to force it to halt its nuclear and missile tests, which only provide the US with a pretext for its continued military build-up in the region.

Relations between the two allies are tense. China's chief North Korean official, Wu Dawei, held discussions in South Korea last week but according to the South Korean media is yet to arrange a meeting with North Korean leaders. The Yonhap news agency

quoted a diplomatic source as saying: "I understand the Chinese side is asking but the North is not replying."

The prospect of a US war against North Korea is provoking deep anxieties and fears in Beijing. An editorial in yesterday's state-owned *Global Times* suggested that the Chinese leadership was willing to consider imposing crippling economic sanctions on North Korea, but not to force regime-change, and could react to extensive US military action against Pyongyang by coming to the aid of its ally to prevent a US take-over.

The editorial warned: "If the blow is heavy, the Chinese people will not allow their government to remain passive when the armies of the US and South Korea start a war and try to take down the Pyongyang regime... If Pyongyang were to be taken by the allied armies of the US and South Korea, it would dramatically change the geopolitical situation in the Korean Peninsula."

The comments underscore the dangers of a war on the Korean Peninsula, drawing nuclear armed powers such as China into a devastating global conflagration.



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