

Pence's Asian tour reinforces US threats to North Korea

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With a two-day stop in Sydney, US Vice President Mike Pence last weekend concluded a 10-day tour of key US Asia-Pacific capitals, shoring up alliances for potential military action against North Korea.

Throughout his trip to South Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Australia, Pence and other members of the Trump administration reiterated their threats against North Korea and escalated their demands on China to intervene against Beijing's neighbouring ally.

As Pence wound up his mission, US Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly said in an interview on CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday that a North Korean nuclear missile capable of striking the US would mean "we're at grave risk as a nation." He claimed North Korea could achieve this capability before Trump would begin his second term.

In reality, the North Korean missile and nuclear capacity remains primitive and puny compared to the massive arsenal of the US. It is Washington, not Pyongyang, that is provoking a conflict that could draw in other nuclear-armed powers, notably China and Russia, both of which have borders with North Korea.

The provocations mounted on Sunday when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government in Japan confirmed that two of its naval destroyers would rendezvous with the US aircraft carrier Carl Vinson's battle group for exercises to "practice a variety of tactics." Timed to occur during tomorrow's North Korea's Military Foundation Day commemorations, the exercises would start in the South China Sea and continue in the Sea of Japan, off the Korean coast.

At the weekend, US President Donald Trump also revived his accusations that the Chinese government was not doing enough to end North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. "China is very much the economic lifeline to North Korea," he wrote in a tweet.

"So while nothing is easy, if they want to solve the North Korean problem, they will."

According to public statements, the confrontation with North Korea was "top of the agenda" in Pence's talks in Seoul, Tokyo, Jakarta and Sydney. What exactly was discussed behind closed doors was not revealed.

The tour began in South Korea, whose more than 50 million people would be on the immediate front line of any war, and proceeded to Japan, where 127 million people would also be directly in the firing line. Pence then stopped in Indonesia, which Washington regards as a vital strategic location in its underlying confrontation with China. In Jakarta, Pence said the chief objective of his visit was to signal "the high value" that the US places on its "strategic partnership" with Indonesia, established during the Obama administration.

At a joint media conference with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on the shores of Sydney Harbour on Saturday, Pence three times repeated Washington's menacing warnings that "all options are on the table" against North Korea—a blunt military threat—and that if China does not "deal with" North Korea, "the United States will."

Pence described the US alliance with Australia as "inviolable" and "immutable." He noted that Australia had fought alongside the US in every major war of the last century. "From the Coral Sea to Kandahar our friendship has been forged in the fires of sacrifice," Pence declared.

Turnbull reciprocated with a gushing performance, saying he was "honoured" by Pence's visit. Turnbull praised the "Pax Americana" provided by long-standing US interest and intervention in the Pacific. "And the US understand that they have no stronger,

more committed, more loyal partner, ally than Australia,” he said.

Like Pence, Turnbull defined the relationship in terms of war. He referred to an alliance that “began nearly a century ago when Australian and American troops went into battle in the first world war. Since then ... Australia has stood shoulder to shoulder with the United States in every major conflict in the past 99 years.”

Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten made similar utterances. He described the supposed “security shield” provided by the US as a “bedrock” of Australian foreign policy, for which he was “grateful.”

Without any consultation with the Australia population, the political establishment is placing millions of people at risk of a devastating nuclear war. During the media conference with Pence, Turnbull refused to answer a reporter’s question about whether Australia would join any US military action against North Korea. Instead, he said Australia was providing diplomatic support to the US, and he was “confident” that China would respond.

The truth is that any US war on the Korean Peninsula would automatically involve Australia. The American satellite communication base at Pine Gap would be pivotal to any military operations, not to speak of Australia’s membership of the US-led “Five Eyes” global intelligence network, the integration of Australian officers into US military commands, and the US Marines and war planes based in northern Australia.

The latest rotation of more than 1,250 Marines and accompanying military aircraft that touched down in Darwin last week “stand ready to fight” against North Korea, their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Brian Middleton, told reporters.

Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* reported that Turnbull convened a meeting of the cabinet national security committee on the eve of Pence’s arrival to discuss the North Korean situation with defence officials. The options canvassed included stepping up military exercises between the US and Australia, further economic sanctions against North Korea and “contingency planning in the event of conflict.”

During Pence’s visit, both Turnbull and Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop deliberately inflamed the atmosphere. They fed sensational headlines in the media by depicting North Korea as an imminent danger to Australia. Without offering any evidence, Bishop

branded the country a “serious threat” to Australia, which would soon be “in reach of its missiles.”

Her remarks provoked a militarist response. North Korea’s foreign ministry said if Australia remained “a shock brigade of the US master,” that would be “a suicidal act of coming within the range of a nuclear strike” from North Korea.

This bluster, like similar statements in recent days, points to alarmed efforts by the regime to forestall a US attack. But this only plays into the hands of Washington, while driving a wedge between North Korean workers and their fellow workers internationally, who have a common interest in overturning the governments now bringing the world to the brink of a nuclear war.

Corporate media outlets in Australia portrayed Pence’s visit as designed to reassure Australians of the Trump administration’s commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. Today’s *Australian* editorial called it “a welcome reminder of the enduring value of our alliance with Washington, the cornerstone of our security.”

Far from being reassured, recent polls indicate that millions of Australians regard the Trump administration and the US alliance as the greatest danger facing them.

There were no major protests against Pence’s visit, but security was tight. Snipers were seen on rooftops, helicopters hovered low, US Secret Service agents were highly visible, roads were closed for Pence’s motorcade and large police contingents lined the streets, parks and businesses.



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