

US tests missile in Pacific as it escalates threats to North Korea

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While demanding that North Korea halt its nuclear and missile tests—and threatening military attack if it does not—the Trump administration will today test launch a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) from California across the Pacific, in a menacing show of force.

According to Air Force Global Strike Command, the operation will test the weapon’s “effectiveness, accuracy and readiness.” In the context of the mounting US military pressure on North Korea and its neighbour China, it is an unmistakeable threat of American preparedness to use nuclear-armed ICBMs.

Missile launches were “essential to verify the status of our national nuclear force and to demonstrate our national nuclear capabilities,” Colonel Chris Moss, the Vandenberg Air Force Base 30th Space Wing commander said.

For all the political and media hysteria about the danger presented by North Korea’s small and primitive nuclear and missile capacity, the provocatively-timed US test again underscores where the real risk of nuclear war resides—in Washington and the Pentagon’s unmatched arsenal of thousands of nuclear warheads.

No target was specified for today’s exercise, but an earlier US missile test, launched from a North Dakota base in February, travelled 6,760 kilometres to a test range at Kwajalein Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands in the northwestern Pacific.

The Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site in the Marshall Islands is just one of the scores of US military bases throughout the Pacific, Japan and South Korea, as well as fleets of warships and submarines, from which devastating attacks on North Korea could be mounted.

On the same day as the missile test, President Donald Trump will hold a rare and suddenly announced White

House briefing on the North Korean situation with all 100 members of the US Senate. Adding to the ominous atmosphere, the briefing will be delivered by the top four US war-related officials: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, National Intelligence Director Dan Coats and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph Dunford. (see: “Trump summons the Senate to the White House”)

In another sign of war preparations, Trump had a publicised dinner on Monday night with two key foreign policy “hawks”—Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham. No information was released on what they discussed, but Graham tweeted the next day: “Donald Trump is NOT going to let the nutjob in North Korea develop a missile—with a nuclear weapon on top—that can hit the US.” The “nutjob” was an insulting reference to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

As these developments unfolded, Washington was encircling the Korean Peninsula with nuclear-capable warships conducting war games with Japanese and South Korean naval vessels.

The USS Wayne E. Meyer, a destroyer, began exercises yesterday with a South Korean destroyer in the Yellow Sea, west of Korea. Another destroyer, the USS Fitzgerald conducted drills with a Japanese destroyer in the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, east of Korea.

The US Seventh Fleet said both exercises demonstrate “the US Navy’s inherent flexibility to combine with allied naval forces in response to a broad range of situations.”

In further chilling displays, the USS Michigan, a guided-missile submarine, docked in the South Korean port of Busan and the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier task force, accompanied by Japanese ships, is due to arrive in the waters off the Korean Peninsula to stage a

combined operation with the South Korean navy.

Despite incessant claims by the political elites and corporate media that North Korea was poised to conduct its sixth nuclear test yesterday, the country's 85th anniversary of its army, Pyongyang reportedly only conducted live-fire artillery drills near Wonsan on the east coast.

On Monday Trump summoned ambassadors from the 15 UN Security Council members, including China and Russia, to demand they impose further crippling sanctions on North Korea, featuring an oil embargo, transport bans and punitive measures against Chinese banks allegedly doing business in North Korea. This was despite evidence, such as soaring oil prices in North Korea, that China is already severely constricting supplies.

Trump delivered what amounted to an ultimatum, declaring that North Korea was “a real threat to the world” and a “big world problem” that “we have to finally solve.”

Publicly, the Trump administration is holding out the prospect of applying enough pressure on China to compel North Korea to abandon its missile and nuclear programs. But Beijing is sending increasingly alarmed signals that it has “very limited influence” over the Pyongyang regime.

An editorial yesterday in the state-controlled *Global Times* warned that convincing Pyongyang to cease its nuclear activities was not “as easy as saying abracadabra.” The “game of chicken” between Washington and Pyongyang could “quickly get out of control” with terrible consequences that “no side will be able to stop.” It described the situation as “puzzle filled with bombs” and declared: “Pyongyang must not strike a match and detonate it.”

This was not the first time that Beijing has voiced dismay at the danger of a military conflagration that would have a severely damaging impact on China's geo-strategic interests.

Two days earlier, a *Global Times* editorial openly criticised North Korea, and said Pyongyang was making a “mistake” if it thought that Beijing considered it “a sentinel and on guard duty for China.” The editorial declared that North Korea's nuclear program was “jeopardising China's major national interests” and preventing Pyongyang from developing nuclear weapons was already “Beijing's priority” in

Northeast Asia.

China's leaders obviously understand that their country, not just its erstwhile ally North Korea, is Washington's target. A US assault on the Korean Peninsula could not only lead to the destabilising collapse of North Korea, near one of China's major industrial regions, but install a US-backed regime on China's border, as the US sought to during the 1950-53 Korean War.

The fact that China is in the firing line was highlighted yesterday by testimony at a US Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing on the Asia-Pacific region. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace senior fellow Ashley Tellis described North Korea as a “near-term” challenge, whereas “the challenges emanating from China are long term, enduring and aimed fundamentally at decoupling the United States from its Asian partners.”

These comments again point to the underlying driving force behind the Korean crisis. Not just in North East Asia but around the world, the ruling US capitalist class is intent on using America's military might to offset its economic decline and block China, or any other potential rival, from challenging the global hegemony it established through victory over Germany and Japan in World War II.



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