

White House briefing signals escalating war preparations against North Korea

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The unprecedented bussing of the entire Senate to the White House to be briefed by military and intelligence officials on possible military action against North Korea was one of a number of events yesterday pointing to planning for a potentially catastrophic war.

As the WSWS noted in yesterday's Perspective, the Trump administration's summoning of the senators was not an exercise in congressional oversight but the opposite: the political representatives of the ruling class received their marching orders, and talking points, from the military brass.

Speaking to journalists after the meeting, participants denied that any specific military line of attack was discussed. By every indication, however, the executive and its military-intelligence officials informed the senators they would be told after the event, if and when the administration launched a military assault.

There were no reports of any protest against being summoned by the White House in this manner, let alone any boycott of the gathering. Rather, the response was one of bipartisan backing for the escalating war planning, laced with calls for tougher action against China, supposedly to pressure Beijing to compel Pyongyang to abandon its missile and nuclear programs.

As scheduled, the Senate was briefed at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next to the White House by Defense Secretary James Mattis, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence reportedly greeted the senators on arrival and then left.

Before the meeting, Mattis, Coats and Tillerson issued a joint statement that pronounced Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons "an urgent national security

threat and top foreign policy priority." They declared: "Past efforts have failed to halt North Korea's unlawful weapons programs and nuclear and ballistic missile tests."

The statement claimed Trump's approach aimed to pursue "diplomatic measures" with allies and partners to "convince the regime to de-escalate," but concluded on a threatening note: "However, we remain prepared to defend ourselves and our allies."

Various comments by senators after the briefing ranged from support for US military action against North Korea to pushing for a harder stance against China. There was no dissent from the incessant propaganda aimed at whipping up fears of a future North Korean nuclear attack.

Senator Ted Cruz told Fox News: "It is of course the hope that military action does not prove necessary, but if there is a clear and imminent threat to the United States, our military needs to be prepared to act." John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said one should not rule out a preemptive strike.

One unnamed Republican senator complained they were given "very few details about what has changed." He said the basic gist of the briefing was: "We've reached a point where things are getting pretty dire and getting to the point where we've got to get more aggressive."

Some senators, notably Democrats, called for harsher sanctions against China. Democratic Senator Ed Markey said he had not seen evidence that China was doing enough. Chris Coons, a Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, exemplified the underlying bipartisanship. He said Trump was developing a "diplomatic strategy that strikes me as clear-eyed and well proportioned to the threat."

Earlier in the day, US Pacific Command chief Admiral Harry Harris, who would lead any attack on the Korean Peninsula, gave an indication of the Pentagon's message. Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee, he asserted that denuclearisation by North Korea—the goal outlined publicly by the White House—is no longer a realistic option.

Harris said he had no confidence that North Korea would refrain from “something precipitous” should it succeed in miniaturising a nuclear weapon to mount on a ballistic missile. He said the US had “a lot of preemptive options,” but declined to provide specifics.

The admiral advocated greater shows of military force, including overflying the Korean Peninsula with nuclear-capable B-1 and B-52 bombers. This would be on top of the current visits and exercises by two US destroyers, the guided-missile submarine USS Michigan and the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier strike.

Harris acknowledged that possible reprisals stemming from a strike against North Korea would place at risk the lives of millions of Koreans and Japanese, as well as the 28,500 US troops in South Korea. But he argued this danger was outweighed by the prospect of “a lot more Koreans and Japanese and Americans dying if North Korea achieves its nuclear aims.”

In another indication of war planning, Harris urged Congress to add ballistic-missile interceptors to installations in Alaska and California, and to “study” placing interceptors in Hawaii while immediately bolstering defensive radars there.

Harris took aim at China, saying it had substantial leverage against North Korea. He labeled as “preposterous” China's alleged pressure on South Korean companies to stall the placement of a US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery in South Korea.

The US claims the THAAD facility is a purely defensive weapon to intercept incoming missiles. In reality, its radar capacity is designed to probe deep into China and the system's underlying purpose is to block any attempt by North Korea or China to respond to a US first-strike nuclear attack.

Defying protests by China, as well as hundreds of local residents, US personnel yesterday began to install the THAAD equipment at a former golf course in

Seongju. It was an earlier-than-expected move, effectively preempting South Korea's presidential election on May 9.

Television footage showed military trailers carrying large units, including what appeared to be launch canisters, on to the site. Protesters hurled water bottles at the vehicles, despite the efforts of thousands of police to block them.

Back-Gwang-soon, 73, who has lived in Seongju all her life, told the *Guardian* she was “speechless with anger.” She explained: “This is a quiet place, where we welcome outsiders with open arms. Now it's being ruined by the arrival of American weapons that have turned us into a North Korean target.”

The THAAD deployment provoked further alarm bells in Beijing. Yesterday's editorial in the state-run *Global Times* declared: “It is infuriating that the US and South Korea have stabbed China in the back at a critical time when China and the US are cooperating to prevent North Korea from carrying out a new nuclear or missile test.”

At the same time an Op-Ed in the *People's Daily*, the official organ of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, continued to plead for an accommodation with Washington. Citing this month's meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the commentary held out the hope that such “high-level dialogues” should “help dispel the old idea that the two sides are destined for war.”

In reality, yesterday's developments demonstrate an escalating confrontation, driven by Washington's determination to assert unchallenged hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region, at China's expense.



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