

Trump threatens “major conflict” with North Korea

Mike Head
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US President Donald Trump last night warned there was “absolutely” the chance of a “major, major conflict” with North Korea, while claiming that he would prefer a diplomatic outcome to Washington’s demand for North Korea to shut down its nuclear and missile programs.

“We’d love to solve things diplomatically, but it’s very difficult,” Trump told Reuters in an Oval Office interview ahead of his 100th day in office on Saturday. Trump said he believed Chinese President Xi Jinping was “trying very hard” to rein in North Korea because “he certainly doesn’t want to see turmoil and death.”

Trump is seeking to prepare public opinion for a potentially catastrophic military confrontation, portraying the US as doing all it can to avoid war. At the same time, he is intensifying his demands on China, whose alleged failure to contain North Korea could provide a pretext for US military action.

In reality, through a combination of aggressive military exercises and crippling economic sanctions, Washington is deliberately ratcheting up the pressure on the unstable North Korean regime.

According to reports, former US President Jimmy Carter has effectively been instructed by the White House and Pentagon not to try and open up channels of communication with North Korea, as he has in the past. The *Financial Times* reported today: “The plea to Mr Carter signalled concern that the former president could complicate US policy towards Pyongyang; he has forced previous administrations to change tack, including in 1994 when Bill Clinton had been considering launching a military strike against North Korea.”

Contrary to corporate media claims that the threat of imminent war has receded, following this week’s unprecedented summoning of the Senate to the White House for a military-intelligence briefing on the Korean crisis, the risks created by the Trump administration’s provocative actions are mounting.

Numerous US warships, joined by South Korean and Japanese vessels, are carrying out large-scale exercises in

waters near the Korean Peninsula. Recently released images showed US and South Korean forces conducting massive live-fire drills close to the demilitarised zone between the North and South. Targets painted on a hillside were obliterated with fighter jets, tanks and attack helicopters.

Officials in Washington and Seoul insist their war games are defensive in nature, but such exercises are now based on an aggressive operational plan, OPLAN 5015, agreed to between the US and South Korea in late 2015. It includes pre-emptive strikes on North Korea in the event of a war, as well as decapitation raids to assassinate its top leaders.

Pyongyang has denounced the current exercises as rehearsals for invasion. Clearly, there is an acute possibility that the war games could spark military clashes, even by mistake or miscalculation, that could start a potential nuclear war on the doorstep of China and Russia, both of which have borders with North Korea.

Evidently fearing attack, North Korea yesterday released a propaganda video depicting simulated assaults on the United States, showing the White House as a target, followed by an aircraft carrier exploding into flames. The accompanying caption translates into English to read: “When the enemy takes the first step toward provocation and invasion.”

This propaganda is both ludicrous and reactionary. Kim Jung-un’s regime lacks any capacity to mount such attacks—its missiles and nuclear weapons remain primitive—and it would be annihilated by US forces if it attempted to launch any kind of attack. Such videos only play into the hands of Washington, giving it a pretext to conduct a supposed “preemptive” war, while dividing North Korean workers from their fellow workers in America and internationally.

To intensify the pressure on Pyongyang, South Korea’s interim government yesterday said it had agreed with Washington on “swift punitive measures” against North Korea in the event of further North Korean nuclear or missile tests.

The measures, including a new UN Security Council resolution, would be “unbearable for the North,” the

South's presidential office said after its national security adviser, Kim Kwan-jin, held a phone call with his US counterpart, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster.

On Friday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will chair a special UN Security Council meeting. Tillerson will be "very vocal" about nations enforcing new sanctions on North Korea, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said.

The measures will seek to starve North Korea of any remaining foreign income, adding to the damaging impact of the existing sanctions being enforced by the US and its allies. Among the measures being proposed are bans on North Korea's trade of fishing rights and on North Korean workers being employed overseas.

Washington has also threatened new sanctions against Chinese finance houses allegedly doing business in North Korea. This is despite evidence that China's own measures against Pyongyang, including the suspension of coal purchases—the North's previous biggest revenue earner—are already having a severe effect. North Korean exports to China, its main market, fell 35 percent month-on-month in March, down to just \$US114.56 million, according to Chinese customs data.

The Trump administration's focus on China, accompanied by demands that Beijing take action to stop North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, aims to destabilise not just North Korea but China as well. Washington has continued to insist that China must do more, despite the Beijing leadership protesting that it has little control over Pyongyang and appealing for a partnership with the US to resolve the crisis via dialogue.

For all Beijing's efforts to appease Washington, the Pentagon this week installed a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile battery in South Korea, defying protests by both China and Russia.

Far from being a defensive weapon, the THAAD facility can conduct surveillance deep into China and Russia. Its purpose is to prevent any retaliation in the event of a US first-strike nuclear attack.

Facing intense public opposition in South Korea to the THAAD deployment, the US brought forward the installation to preempt the outcome of the May 9 presidential election to replace the impeached Park Geun-hye.

The Pentagon's belligerence was underscored when Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, told a US Congressional hearing this week that the THAAD system would be operational within days. Harris declared the battery would destroy any missile aimed at US forces. "If it flies, it will die," Harris said.

China's Foreign Ministry expressed "grave concern." It said the THAAD deployment broke the strategic balance in the region and ratcheted up the tension on the Korean

Peninsula. China urged the US and South Korea to withdraw the equipment, and warned that China would take necessary actions "to safeguard its own interests."

Yesterday, China announced it would conduct live-fire drills and test new weapons to counter the THAAD system. A military spokesperson said the exercises would simulate counter-attack scenarios, including launching preemptive strikes to knock out the THAAD using anti-radiation, surface-to-surface or cruise missiles.

In Moscow, China and Russia conducted their third joint anti-missile press conference, saying the THAAD deployment aimed to weaken their strategic capability and the two countries would take further action to safeguard their security interests.

"Unilaterally strengthening an anti-missile system is a move to achieve absolute military advantage, which would escalate tensions, trigger regional confrontation or even spark an arms race," China's Central Military Commission spokesman Cai Jun said.

Further fuelling the escalating tensions and uncertainty, the Rand Corporation, a Pentagon-linked think tank, this week released a report pointing to likely North Korean regime-change operations by the US. Citing senior officials who have defected, the report asserted that wealthy North Korean elites increasingly regarded Kim Jong-un as weak and ineffective. The report advocated steps to reach out to these elites in order to facilitate the unification of Korea along capitalist lines.

Such a regime-change intervention would seek to establish a pro-US state on China's border, as Washington sought to do during the 1950–53 Korean War, as part of a wider drive to assert unchallenged US hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region.



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