

US show of force intensifies pressure on North Korea and China

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By staging provocative displays of military might, the Trump administration and the Pentagon are continuing to threaten North Korea and heighten the pressure on the Chinese leadership to intervene against its erstwhile neighbouring ally. This is taking tensions on the Korean Peninsula to fever pitch.

In the latest show of force, the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson paraded with an armada off the Korean coast on Wednesday, after earlier conducting war games with the Japanese navy. For the menacing display, the giant warship was joined by two South Korean destroyers—Sejong the Great and Yang Manchun—as well as three US guided-missile destroyers, the USS Wayne E. Meyer, USS Michael Murphy and USS Stetham, and the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Lake Champlain.

F-18 Hornets and Super Hornets flew overhead while the spectacle was recorded on video for the US Seventh Fleet, which would lead any attack on North Korea (see US Navy footage). It was the second aggressive demonstration in two days, against a backdrop of ongoing declarations by the Trump White House that “all options”—including military ones—remain “on the table” for dealing with the supposed danger presented by North Korea’s primitive missile and nuclear arsenal.

On Monday, the US Air Force sent two B-1B Lancer strategic bombers from Guam to the Korean Peninsula, ostensibly to engage in training exercises with South Korean and Japanese military forces.

The aircraft carrier group’s display was doubly inflammatory because the North Korean government had condemned the Carl Vinson’s exercises as a rehearsal for invasion, and threatened to turn the carrier into a “giant heap of scrap metal” and “bury it in the sea.” Such militarist posturing by Kim Jong-un’s regime has only played into Washington’s hands,

giving the US pretexts to ramp up its military threats.

Further evidence of US planning for a military confrontation came with an initially unannounced three-day visit to South Korea by US Central Intelligence Agency director Mike Pompeo. In a media release on Tuesday, the final day of the visit, US Forces Korea said Pompeo conducted in-depth security discussions with local authorities, as well as US diplomatic and military officials.

According to the US statement, Pompeo met with South Korean National Intelligence Service Director Lee Byeong Ho, South Korea-US Combined Forces Command head General Vincent Brooks and US Embassy Seoul Charge d’Affaires Marc Knapper, among others. Combined Forces deputy commander General Leem Ho-young also accompanied the CIA director during his trip.

Pointedly, Pompeo visited an island near the tense inter-Korean border. He travelled to Yeonpyeong Island to view the contested waters between the two Koreas and “gain a first-hand appreciation of the North Korean threat to South Korea at this past and potential flashpoint,” the US Forces Korea statement said.

The island became a flashpoint, and a source of a diplomatic conflict between the US and China, in November 2010, when it came under a North Korean artillery attack, in which two South Korean marines and two civilians were killed. At that time, Pyongyang insisted that its shelling was a countermeasure against South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea, during which shells were fired into North Korea’s territory. The Obama administration exploited the clash to demand that China intervene to contain North Korea.

Pompeo is the fourth high-ranking American official to travel to Seoul in recent weeks, coming soon after Vice President Mike Pence’s trip to Asia last month to

shore up US alliances for potential military action against North Korea. Earlier, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis made separate trips to South Korea to underscore the Trump government's focus on confronting North Korea.

A South Korean local daily, the *Chosun Ilbo*, said Pompeo briefed South Korean officials on details for implementing the Trump administration's new policy on Pyongyang. It quoted multiple intelligence sources. The newspaper said the officials also assessed North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities and the internal situation of the Kim Jong-un regime.

South Korean media outlets highlighted Pompeo's visit because it came just a week before South Korea's May 9 presidential election, caused by the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye.

Pre-poll voting is already underway in the election, in which the leading contender, Democrat Moon Jae-in, has called for a delay in the US deployment in South Korea of its THAAD ballistic missile warfare system. Moon is seeking to exploit deep public opposition to the installation, while reassuring Washington of his support for the US alliance. The Pentagon, however, defiantly accelerated the THAAD installation to ensure it was in operation before the election.

Moon's campaign office expressed surprise at Pompeo's visit. "We did not even know about his arrival in South Korea," an official said. "There is no contact (from the US) with us."

Whatever Pompeo discussed, by rapidly installing the THAAD battery the Trump administration has made clear it will not accept any wavering by a new administration in South Korea, which hosts key US bases and 28,500 military personnel on China's doorstep.

Trump's calculated brinkmanship and unpredictability—alternating between military threats and claims he would be happy to meet Kim Jong-un if the "circumstances" were right—has evidently raised such tensions between Beijing and Pyongyang that their growing differences have been aired publicly.

Trump has repeatedly demanded that China stop North Korea from conducting any further missile or nuclear tests. He has claimed that Chinese President Xi Jinping has agreed to act decisively to do so, despite protests by Beijing that it lacks any leverage over Pyongyang. Beijing has suspended coal imports from

North Korea, one of the regime's primary revenue sources, but fears that a collapse of the North's state would create a crisis along its border and lead to the installation of a US-backed regime.

In a commentary on Wednesday, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) denounced the *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, and the *Global Times*, another Chinese state-run media outlet, for having "raised lame excuses for the base acts of dancing to the tune of the US." It said Chinese suggestions that the North give up its weapons crossed a "red line" and "China had better ponder over the grave consequences" of "chopping down the pillar" of North Korea-China relations.

In a response on Thursday, the *Global Times* accused Pyongyang of "grappling with some form of irrational logic over its nuclear program," and declared that Beijing "should also make Pyongyang aware that it will react in unprecedented fashion if Pyongyang conducts another nuclear test."

The editorial did not spell out what such an "unprecedented" reaction would be. But it warned that the North's actions threatened a 1961 treaty of non-aggression between the two countries. It added: "China will not allow its northeastern region to be contaminated by North Korea's nuclear activities."

These recriminations underscore the volatile situation created by the US, in which a conflagration could erupt involving nuclear weapons.



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