North Korea under siege

Peter Symonds
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The unstable, crisis-ridden North Korean regime is increasingly under siege on all sides, as the Trump administration ramps up its threats of war on the Korean Peninsula and pressures Beijing to compel Pyongyang to give up its nuclear and missile programs. While formally an ally of North Korea, China has already voted for a series of UN resolutions imposing harsh sanctions and is currently discussing further UN penalties with the US.

A commentary published this week by the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) lashed out at Beijing, accusing it of "insincerity and betrayal" and warning of "grave consequences entailed by its reckless act of chopping down the pillar of the DPRK [North Korea]-China relations." The KCNA reiterated that North Korea would not give up its nuclear weapons, setting it on a collision course not only with the US and Washington's allies, but also China.

The Pyongyang regime, which depends heavily on China economically, is reacting to growing pressure from Beijing to bow to US demands. In February, China announced the suspension of coal imports from North Korea for the remainder of the year, and last month reportedly turned away a fleet of North Korean cargo ships laden with coal. Beijing is deeply concerned that Pyongyang's weapon programs have created the pretext for a US military build up in North East Asia aimed against China.

The US threat of war on the Korean Peninsula has deepened the debate within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus over North Korea, including suggestions that Beijing should pre-empt Washington with its own regime-change operation in Pyongyang or support its integration with South Korea. Such is the gulf between the two allies, once described as being as close as "lips and teeth," that since taking office in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping has not met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The US has maintained sanctions against North Korea since the 1950–53 Korean War, in which millions of civilians and troops from the two Koreas, China, the US and its allies died. While an armistice halted the fighting in 1953, no peace treaty was ever reached. North Korea is still effectively at war with South Korea and the US.

North Korea's isolation worsened following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which had provided economic and military aid and accounted for around 60 percent of the country's international trade. Pyongyang was compelled to turn to Beijing for assistance and trade. It relies on China for oil and food, as well as industrial and consumer goods.

The Pyongyang regime's own shift to capitalist restoration and pro-market relations has been significantly hampered by the US-led blockade, which has only intensified in the past 25 years. Free trade zones were established with South Korea at Kaesong—currently closed—and with China. North Korea has also engaged in the export of cheap labour, with an estimated 20,000 workers in China, Russia and the Middle East.

As the US has heightened its confrontation with North Korea, several articles in the American and international press have noted the widespread market economy that has greatly exacerbated the social divide between a wealthy elite, along with private traders, smugglers and "red capitalists," and the majority of impoverished workers and farmers.

A lengthy article in the *New York Times* on April 30 noted an estimate by the South Korean intelligence agency that at least 40 percent of the population in North Korea was now engaged in some form of private enterprise. While his father reportedly attempted to crack down on marketplaces, they have flourished under Kim Jong-un, doubling to 440 and, based on satellite imagery, expanding in size.

Wealthy *donju* or money owners "invest in construction projects, establish partnerships with resource-strapped state factories and bankroll imports from China to supply retailers in the marketplaces," the article explained. "They operate with 'covers', or party officials, who protect their businesses. Some are relatives of party officials. Others are ethnic Chinese citizens, who are allowed regular visits to China and can facilitate cross-border financial transactions, and people with relatives who have fled to South Korea and send them cash remittances."

These political and economic elites, concentrated in Pyongyang, have access to luxury goods, including at ski and beach resorts, while most of the population eke out an impoverished existence under police-state conditions.

The *New York Times* article was headlined, "As the economy grows, North Korea's grip on society is tested." It undoubtedly reflects efforts in Washington to identify discontented social layers that could provide the basis for "regime-change" in Pyongyang—either through a "colour revolution" or the elimination of the top leadership by other means.

Yesterday the North Korean ministry of state security issued details of what it claimed to be a CIA plot to kill Kim Jong-un and other leaders. While it is impossible to corroborate such accusations, a number of American political figures and analysts have advocated assassination and regime-change in Pyongyang to achieve US ends.

Washington's broken promises

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, successive US administrations have pursued the barely-disguised aim of bringing about the collapse of the North

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Korean government—and thus undermining China, which has maintained the country as a buffer to South Korea and Japan.

In 1994, the Clinton administration was on the brink of launching a military attack on North Korea, on the pretext of the threat posed by its nuclear program, but pulled back at the last minute in the face of potentially huge casualties, including among US troops in South Korea. Instead, Washington struck a deal with Pyongyang—the Agreed Framework—under which North Korea shut down its nuclear facilities and allowed UN inspection in return for supplies of bunker oil, the construction of two light water nuclear power plants and promises of diplomatic normalisation.

The agreement was the basis for the so-called Sunshine Policy in South Korea that envisaged the transformation of North Korea into a cheap labour platform for South Korean conglomerates. European powers offered their support, viewing North Korea not only as an investment opportunity but the means for establishing transport links across Eurasia to South Korea and Japan.

The US, however, failed to keep its side of the deal—construction of the nuclear reactors never began and it was only in the dying days of the Clinton administration that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made a highly-publicised visit to Pyongyang. The incoming Bush administration rapidly overturned the Agreed Framework and in 2002 declared that North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, formed an "axis of evil."

Any rapprochement with North Korea that led to an end to the US economic, diplomatic and military blockade of the country would undermine Washington's pretext for maintaining military forces in North East Asia and its ability to use Pyongyang as a means of putting pressure on Beijing.

North Korea resumed its nuclear and missile program and exploded its first crude atomic bomb in 2006. Bogged down in its military occupation in Iraq, the Bush administration turned to China to put pressure on North Korea and reached a deal in 2007 to dismantle North Korea's nuclear facilities and allow UN inspections in return for vague US promises to normalise relations.

The US political and media establishment constantly accuses North Korea of bad faith, but the Bush administration reneged on the bargain and eventually sabotaged the agreement. Pyongyang shut its nuclear reactor, and even began the process of dismantlement, and allowed UN inspectors into the country. Washington took just one step—the removal of North Korea from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, before insisting on far more intrusive inspections than were specified in the agreement, which quickly broke down in 2008.

In contrast to its steps to reach a deal with Iran, the Obama administration made no moves to restart talks with North Korea and ramped up sanctions in response to further North Korean nuclear and missile tests. In the final days of his administration, Obama reportedly advised Trump that North Korea would be the most pressing foreign policy issue confronting the US.

The North Korean regime, which rests heavily on the military and its police-state apparatus, has responded to its growing isolation and US threats with its own bellicose warnings and an acceleration of its nuclear and missile programs. Having few other bargaining chips, it has attempted to use its nuclear arsenal to reach a deal with the US that would end the blockade and allow the regime to attract foreign investment by transforming the country into an ultra-cheap labour platform.

Despite the bluster of North Korean leaders, their limited stockpile of nuclear weapons, far from defending the North Korean people, is transforming the country into a target for US imperialism. Its nationalist demagogy only sows divisions between workers in North Korea and in South Korea, Japan and the United States and undermines the unity of the international working class—the only social force capable of halting the drive to war.

The regime in Pyongyang is facing an economic and political crisis, as low levels of economic growth, compounded by aged and outmoded technology, equipment and industrial plant, and growing social inequality fuel divisions within the ruling elites. To consolidate his grip on power, Kim Jong-un has reportedly carried out a series of purges, including of top officials such as his uncle Jang Song-thaek, killed in 2013, who had close ties with Beijing.

The Trump administration has greatly heightened the crisis in Pyongyang and the danger of war. Besieged on all sides, it is unclear how the North Korean regime would respond to a provocation or military attack by US imperialism or South Korea.

The American and international press has not only demonised Pyongyang but greatly inflated the threat posed by the North Korean military. While on paper, North Korea's army (KPA) is the world's fourth largest with more than one million troops, and another seven million in reserves, much of its equipment is badly outdated and, in the event of war, would quickly be hit by fuel and other shortages.

A 2015 US Defence Department report stated: "The KPA has not acquired new fighter aircraft in decades, relies on older air defence systems, lacks ballistic missile defence, its Navy does not train for blue-water operations, and recently unveiled artillery systems that include tractor-towed rocket launchers."

A former US military officer told the *Financial Times*: "Once the Korean People's Army starts or stumbles into a decisive conventional war, they will run out of something critical like fuel or bullets or parts in 30 days tops. Based on numbers from a corps-sized unit I saw, it may even be as early as two weeks." North Korea's lack of a credible conventional military response heightens the danger that it could try to use nuclear weapons—with catastrophic results.

The Trump administration's reckless brinkmanship has created a tinderbox on the Korean Peninsula, where a miscalculation or provocation could quickly escalate into a conflict that could draw in nuclear-armed powers such as Russia and China.

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