

US threatens war with North as South Korean president arrives in Washington

James Cogan
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The prospect of the United States launching a war against North Korea will dominate the meeting between recently elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in and President Donald Trump in Washington. The two will sit down tonight for dinner and hold formal talks tomorrow.

From the day it took office, the Trump administration has dramatically ratcheted up longstanding US hostility toward the North Korean regime, ostensibly over its efforts to develop nuclear weapons and inter-continental ballistic missiles. It has declared North Korea must unilaterally announce an end to its weapons programs and submit to external verification by US-vetted United Nations inspectors.

The US administration has also demanded that China, the North's only significant trading partner, cut the country off economically or face a raft of US sanctions. The White House is continuously threatening to launch a pre-emptive military strike with its assertions that 'all options are on the table.'

To back up such threats, the Pentagon has deployed an array of additional air and naval power to north-east Asia, reinforcing the substantial military forces the US has permanently based in South Korea and Japan. At present, three aircraft carrier battle groups are within striking range of North Korea. The naval armada includes at least a dozen destroyers and Ohio-class submarines that could unleash hundreds of cruise missiles within minutes of receiving the order. It can be taken as given that facilities across the North are being targeted by American nuclear weapons both on land and on submarines operating in the Pacific Ocean.

The North has responded to the heightened tensions with its own militarist rhetoric and a series of missile tests. These have played into the hands of the Trump administration, which has exploited them to conduct a

propaganda campaign that Hawaii and even the continental US will, if the North Korean regime is not disarmed, face the threat of attack by nuclear weapons.

National security advisor General H.R. McMaster set an ominous tone for the talks between Moon and Trump yesterday. He declared: "What we have to do is prepare all options because the President has made clear to us that he will not accept a nuclear power in North Korea and a threat that can target the United States and target the American population."

He continued: "The threat is much more immediate now. We can't repeat the same failed approach of the past ... The President has directed us to not do that and to prepare a range of options, including a military option, which nobody wants to take."

Any reckless act or miscalculation by either the US, South Korean or North Korean military could trigger a war that results in a catastrophe. Numerous analysts have noted that North Korean retaliation to any US strike would fall first and foremost on the South Korean capital, Seoul, which, including its outer reaches, has a population of some 25 million. Even if such retaliation only involved conventional weapons, some analysts have predicted civilian casualties in greater Seoul as high as one million dead and wounded in just the first few days of a war.

As Moon arrived today, the US treasury announced that a major Chinese company, Dalian Global Unity, the regional Chinese Bank of Dandong and two prominent business figures would be subjected to sanctions for allegedly trading with the North in defiance of UN-imposed sanctions.

The actions are being taken by the US despite Beijing desperately seeking to appease Washington's demands by slashing purchases of North Korean coal, the country's major export, and over recent days, revealing

that it has limited oil sales. Reports indicate that fuel shortages are already developing in the North, on top of existing shortages for a range of consumer goods. Regardless, the Trump administration has declared that China has “failed” to rein in Pyongyang and its leader Kim Jong-un.

Far from lessening the danger of conflict, the systematic economic starvation of North Korea only heightens it.

Moon Jae-in was elected in May after presenting himself and his nominally “left” Democratic Party of Korea as prepared to act to lessen the risk of war. He asserted that he would unilaterally offer to revive economic link-ups with the North providing that its leader, Kim Jong-un, agreed to negotiations over suspending its weapons’ programs and lessening tensions. He made mild criticisms of the deployment by the US of its anti-missile THAAD system to South Korea.

Since his election, however, Moon, far from seeking to curb Washington’s threats, has fallen into line with the steady build-up toward confrontation with the North. The South Korean military is engaged in almost continuous rehearsals for war alongside American forces. These have included highly provocative actions such as flying US bombers, escorted by South Korean fighters, along the border.

Moon and his administration epitomise the impotence and venality of the bourgeois “left” within the South Korean ruling class.

It is approaching 30 years since US-backed military rule ended in South Korea and democracy was nominally introduced. Over the decades since, the country has emerged as a manufacturing powerhouse and the world’s 11th largest economy. Nevertheless, it remains firmly under the grip of American finance capital, completely subordinated strategically to the US and dominated by the same dozen ultra-wealthy bourgeois families who control the country’s major “chaebol” corporations and exert enormous influence over its political and military establishment.

The pro-capitalist “democrats” in South Korea have never seriously challenged the alliance with the US, the presence of American troops in the country or its ongoing domination by the chaebols. Along with the trade unions, their role has been to promote illusions within the country’s powerful working class that their

aspirations for social and political change, and enduring peace on the peninsula, can be achieved through the façade of parliamentary democracy.

Even after it was revealed the US had expanded the THAAD deployment beyond what had been authorised by the South Korean government, Moon did no more than order a temporary suspension of the expansion while allowing it to remain operational. While justified with references to the threat posed by the North, it is an open secret in strategic circles that the missile defence network the US is erecting in Asia is primarily intended to facilitate an American nuclear “first strike” on China. Its purpose is to try to shoot down any Chinese inter-continental missiles that survived and were fired in retaliation.

Ultimately, the entire US stance against North Korea is aimed at undermining and weakening the strategic position of China. Since the Korean War of 1951–53, Beijing has politically, militarily and economically propped up the Pyongyang regime as it constitutes a geographic buffer between China and the US-aligned South. Beijing has always had deep concerns that any reunification of the Korean peninsula under the auspices of the South could result in American military forces being deployed to its very borders.

If the US does attack North Korea, it would pose the prospect of a direct intervention by China and escalation into an open conflict between major nuclear-armed powers. By collaborating with the Trump war preparations against the North, Moon’s administration, along with other US allies in Asia such as the governments of Japan and Australia, are directly facilitating such a potential disaster for humanity.



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