

North Korean missile launch intensifies war danger

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North Korea's test launch yesterday of a long-range missile has markedly heightened the danger of a war in North East Asia that would have catastrophic consequences for the region and the world.

The launch was followed by threatening missile tests by the South Korean and US militaries, as well as condemnations by the US and its allies and a call for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to impose tougher sanctions.

Pyongyang boasted it was a "proud nuclear power that possesses not only nuclear weapons but also the most powerful ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] that can target any part of the world." The missile reportedly flew on a very steep trajectory to a height of more than 2,500 km before landing some 900 km away in the Sea of Japan.

Such a missile could not hit every part of the world. However, various estimates indicate that on a normal trajectory it could travel between 6,500 to 8,000 km, placing Alaska and Hawaii within its scope. The US media seized on the launch to hype up the danger of a North Korean nuclear attack on the American people, fuelling a climate of fear to create the conditions for US military action.

While the North Korean nuclear missile program as a whole and yesterday's test launch in particular are defensive responses to decades of US threats, provocations and sanctions and an intensifying US-led buildup toward war, they have no progressive content. The North Korean test, along with the regime's bragging, are reactionary. They hand Washington a pretext for escalating the American build-up in Asia, do nothing to defend the North Korean people from a devastating US attack, and sow divisions between workers in North Korea and those in South Korea, Japan, the US and around the world.

The Pentagon initially reported that North Korea had test-fired an intermediate range missile. In that context, Trump lashed out in a tweet: "Hard to believe that South Korea and Japan will put up with this much longer. Perhaps China will put a heavy move on North Korea and end this nonsense once and for all!"

Over the past week, the Trump administration has adopted a confrontational attitude toward China, making a series of provocative moves: a major arms sale to Taiwan, another incursion by a US destroyer into Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea, and the imposition of US penalties on Chinese companies and individuals for trading with North Korea.

In a phone call this week, Trump told Chinese President Xi Jinping the US would act on its own if Beijing failed to force Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons and missiles. Having already imposed harsh sanctions on North Korea, however, the Chinese government is reluctant to go further, fearing it could provoke a political collapse in Pyongyang that Washington would exploit.

President Xi and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin met in Moscow yesterday prior to the G20 summit later this week. A joint statement of the Russian and Chinese foreign ministries condemned the North Korean missile launch and reiterated China's call for North Korea to freeze nuclear and missile tests in return for a halt by the US and South Korea to large-scale joint military exercises—a proposal the US already rejected.

The joint statement also opposed the installation of a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea, declaring it "seriously damages [the] strategic security interests of regional powers, including Russia and China."

Moscow and Beijing are acutely aware that the US military build-up in the Asia Pacific is not primarily directed against the small, impoverished country of North Korea, but is the preparation for war against their countries.

Having acknowledged that North Korea tested an ICBM, the US adopted a more menacing stance. In a press statement yesterday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson branded the missile launch as “a new escalation” of the threat to the US and its allies, and demanded “global action” including the adoption of “stronger measures” by the UN Security Council.

In an implicit threat of US action against countries that failed to implement its dictates, Tillerson declared: “Any country that hosts North Korean guest workers, provides any economic or military benefits, or fails to fully implement UN Security Council resolutions is aiding and abetting a dangerous regime.” The remarks were clearly aimed against China and Russia, which have significant ties to North Korea.

Tillerson concluded with a warning. The US would “never accept a nuclear-armed North Korea.” Trump officials, including Tillerson, have repeatedly warned that “all options”—including pre-emptive military strikes on North Korea—are “on the table.”

Last week, Trump’s national security adviser, General H.R. McMaster, declared that the North Korean “threat is much more immediate now.” He said he had been directed by the president “to prepare a range of options, including a military option, which nobody wants to take.”

In reality, it is the threat of a US attack on North Korea that is much more imminent. The US Army and South Korean military responded today with a barrage of missile tests into South Korean waters. The US Pacific Command said the missiles involved provided “deep strike precision capacity.” A US Army statement declared the armaments could “engage the full array of time-critical targets under all weather conditions.”

Already the US has assembled what Trump boasted was “an armada” near the Korean Peninsula, including two aircraft carrier strike groups and an undisclosed number of nuclear submarines. These naval forces are backed by US bases in South Korea, Japan and Guam and further afield in northern Australia and Hawaii. US Defence Secretary James Mattis has warned that any attempt by North Korea to use its tiny nuclear arsenal

would be met with an “effective and overwhelming” response—that is, nuclear annihilation.

The American and international media continue the drumbeat for war with a deluge of propaganda demonising North Korea and grossly inflating the threat it poses. The real threat to the world, however, is US imperialism, which in its increasingly reckless bid to stave off its historic decline has launched one war of aggression after another in the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa and the Balkans.

It is Washington, and a succession of US administrations, not Pyongyang, that is primarily responsible for creating the explosive situation on the Korean Peninsula. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US has intensified the isolation imposed on North Korea after the end of the Korean War in 1953, in a thinly-disguised bid to precipitate a political collapse in Pyongyang.

While incessantly accusing North Korea of bad faith, the US effectively sabotaged agreements reached in 1994 and 2007 for Pyongyang to denuclearise. The US has deliberately backed North Korea into a corner, by imposing one of the harshest sanction regimes in the world and threatening military strikes.

In May, Defence Secretary Mattis branded North Korea “a direct threat to the United States,” declaring the US did not have to wait until Pyongyang had an ICBM with a nuclear warhead. He warned that any war with North Korea would be “catastrophic” and involve “probably the worst kind of fighting in most people’s lifetimes.”

Yet that is exactly what the Trump administration is planning, preparing for and actively considering. Ominously, Trump has said he has no intention of signalling in advance US military action against North Korea, or any other country. As a result, the world is precariously perched on the brink of a war that would devastate the Korean Peninsula and drag other major powers such as China and Russia into a wider conflict.



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