

Another war threat: Trump rules out talking to North Korea

Peter Symonds
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US President Donald Trump has again placed North East Asia and the world on a knife edge by threatening North Korea with war. In a tweet yesterday, following North Korea's launch of a missile that passed over Japan on Tuesday, he lashed out at Pyongyang and those advocating a diplomatic solution by flatly declaring: "Talking is not the answer!"

The implication of this brief phrase is obvious. If talking is not the answer, then there is no point in further UN sanctions on North Korea and additional efforts to press Beijing to bully Pyongyang into coming to the negotiating table on Washington's terms. The only alternative is a military attack on North Korea, which Trump also implied when he emphasised on Tuesday that "all options are on the table."

In his tweet, Trump declared: "The US has been talking to North Korea, and paying them extortion money, for 25 years." By describing the minor concessions offered to Pyongyang in the two deals that the US did strike with the regime—in 1994 under President Clinton and in 2007 under President Bush—as "extortion money" Trump demonstrated he has no intention of offering North Korea anything, even if talks were agreed.

The only conclusion that the North Korean leadership can draw from Trump's remarks is that the country faces a real and immediate danger of attack by the most powerful military on the face of the planet. This simply compounds the crisis of this unstable, ultra-nationalist regime, which regards its only option as developing and threatening to use its limited nuclear arsenal—a reactionary ploy that plays into Washington's hands and divides the international working class, the only social force that can halt the drive to war.

It is nevertheless US imperialism that bears the chief responsibility for bringing the world to the brink of

nuclear war in North East Asia. Having maintained a diplomatic and economic blockade on North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953, Washington failed to keep its promises and broke the two agreements it did sign with Pyongyang. Obama and now Trump have imposed increasingly stringent sanctions aimed not simply at its nuclear program but at crippling the country's economy. This has been accompanied by the constant refrain that "all options are on the table," backed by huge joint US-South Korean war games that, since 2015, have been premised on pre-emptive strikes against North Korea.

Since Trump took office, his administration has made clear that war is not a distant prospect, years away. Following the firing of two long-range ballistic missiles by North Korea last month, the US Defence Intelligence Agency assessed that the Pyongyang regime would have a nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile capable of hitting the American mainland by next year—a "red-line" for Trump who declared it "won't happen." In a series of unprecedented and incendiary statements this month, Trump warned that the US would engulf North Korea in "fire and fury like the world has never seen"—which can only mean the nuclear incineration of the country.

Trump's utterly reckless comments have provoked tactical divisions within his administration and more broadly within the American political establishment. Within hours of Trump declaring an end to "talking," US Defence Secretary James Mattis openly contradicted the president. Asked by reporters if the US was out of diplomatic solutions to the confrontation with North Korea, Mattis bluntly replied "no," adding, "We are never out of diplomatic solutions."

Mattis, along with others, such as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have never ruled out attacking

North Korea militarily, but in recent weeks have emphasised that the current priority is a diplomatic solution. Just last week, Tillerson declared North Korea had demonstrated “some level of restraint” and hinted at a pathway “in the near future” to “having some dialogue”—a comment suggesting that indirect talks with Pyongyang might be underway already.

Far from dampening tensions, the lack of a coherent policy in Washington intensifies the uncertainty in the extremely tense situation on the Korean Peninsula, which has been under the constant threat of war for months. The fears in Pyongyang of an imminent US attack are further exacerbated by Trump’s insistence that he will not signal any military plans in advance—in other words, any military strikes would come out of the blue.

As he contradicted Trump, Mattis was about to go into a meeting with his South Korean counterpart and promised to “work together” to protect “our nations, our populations and our interests.” South Korea would inevitably bear the full brunt of any North Korean retaliation following US military strikes. Estimates put the number of dead and wounded in the capital of Seoul alone as high as one million in the first few days of fighting.

On Tuesday, James Clapper, former US Director of National Intelligence, responded to Trump’s threat of war against North Korea by declaring that for the first time he agreed with the former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon that US options “were limited.” Just before his removal from Trump’s staff, Bannon ruled out any military option, “until somebody solves the part of the equation that shows me that ten million people in Seoul don’t die in the first 30 minutes from conventional weapons.”

Clapper, who has repeatedly criticised Trump, last week questioned whether Trump was fit to have access to the codes needed to launch a nuclear attack. He warned that if “in a fit of pique he decides to do something about Kim Jong-un, there’s actually very little to stop him [ordering a nuclear strike].” Clapper added: “The whole system is built to ensure rapid response if necessary. So there’s very little in the way of controls over exercising a nuclear option, which is pretty damn scary.”

Earlier this month, Trump’s fascistic adviser Bannon shifted the focus, to target China as the chief threat to

US global dominance. Declaring that Korea was “just a sideshow,” he called for harsh trade sanctions against China. “We’ve come to the conclusion that they’re in an economic war and they’re crushing us,” he said. “One of us is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years and it’s gonna be them if we go down this path.”

Bannon’s remarks underscore the deep crisis in Washington over foreign policy that has followed Trump’s installation as president. The ongoing political furore over, and investigation into, allegations that Trump officials colluded with Russia during the presidential election campaign reflect bitter divisions over whether to confront, and ultimately go to war with, Russia or China first.

The political turmoil over foreign policy is intensified by the worsening economic crisis in the US and internationally. This is widening the social gulf between rich and poor and fuelling popular opposition to Trump, whose utter indifference to the plight of working people has been graphically displayed in response to the Houston flood.

The great danger is that Trump could resort to a catastrophic war with incalculable consequences as a means of directing acute domestic tensions outward against an external enemy. Such a decision would be made behind the backs of the American people and the world’s population by the cabal of generals, political gangsters and billionaires in the White House.

The only means of halting this drive to war is for the working class in the United States and around the world to fight for its own class solution to the crisis: a united international movement based on socialist internationalism to put an end to capitalism, which is the source of war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights.



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