

The US faces off against China and Russia over North Korea

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In the UN Security Council yesterday, the United States dramatically raised the stakes in the intense crisis on the Korean Peninsula following North Korea's nuclear test on Sunday. Washington's response targeted not only Pyongyang, but Beijing and Moscow as well.

A clear division emerged. The US and its allies threatened an economic blockade and, by implication, war against North Korea, while China and Russia continued to appeal for a reduction in tensions and talks.

In a belligerent and provocative speech, US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, delivered an ultimatum to China and Russia: end all economic relations with North Korea or face a full-blown trade war with the US. Moreover, if Beijing and Moscow did not bring Pyongyang to heel, the US would do so through military means.

Standing reality on its head, Haley declared that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was "begging for war." The Pyongyang regime is escalating its nuclear program in a desperate and misguided attempt to ward off a devastating war with the United States that it would inevitably lose. Its latest nuclear test, which it claimed was a hydrogen bomb and had an estimated yield of 100 kilotons, came just days after the US and South Korea finished major annual joint exercises to rehearse for war with North Korea.

Haley demanded that the UN impose "the most stringent set of sanctions on any country in a generation." She warned Washington would not accept what it regarded as half-measures. "We have taken an incremental approach and despite the best of intentions, it has not worked," she declared.

While no details have been released, the sanctions being mooted include cutting off oil supplies, freezing

all financial transactions and ending the export of North Korea labourers. Trump is threatening to cut US trade with any country that conducts any economic activity with North Korea.

"The United States will look at every country that does business with North Korea as a country that is giving aid to their reckless and dangerous nuclear intentions," Haley warned. She declared that US patience was running out, saying "the time has come for us to exhaust all of our diplomatic means before it's too late." By implication, the US would resort to war.

American military allies in Asia and Europe all joined the chorus of condemnation of North Korea's latest nuclear test and demanded the toughest sanctions. Grossly inflating the threat posed by North Korea's limited nuclear arsenal, Japan's ambassador Koro Besso declared the danger posed by Pyongyang had been "raised to an unprecedented level" and was "a grave threat to the peace and security of the world."

China's ambassador Liu Jieyi, however, while condemning Pyongyang, warned that the situation on the Korean Peninsula was "deteriorating constantly" and called for the crisis to be resolved "peacefully." He called on all parties to "make joint efforts together to ease the situation, restart the dialogue and talks, and prevent further deterioration of the situation on the peninsula."

China and Russia have opposed North Korea's nuclear and missile program because it provides a pretext to the US and its allies for a massive military build-up in the Asia Pacific that is ultimately aimed at their countries. At the same time, however, Beijing is deeply concerned that a complete economic embargo on North Korea will precipitate a political crisis in Pyongyang that Washington will exploit to intervene, greatly heightening the danger of war.

Liu reiterated the “freeze for freeze” proposal made by China and Russia, for the US and South Korea to end major military exercises in return for North Korea halting its nuclear and missile testing so as to facilitate new talks. Haley again flatly rejected the plan.

In a blunt warning to the Trump administration, Liu warned that “China will never allow chaos and war on the Peninsula.” In other words, Beijing is determined to use all means at its disposal to prevent a US-led regime-change operation or war on China’s doorstep that would result in a pro-US Korea.

The latest US threats are being accompanied by a major military build-up on the Korean Peninsula in preparation for a war that could include nuclear weapons.

After lashing out at South Korea on Sunday for “talk of appeasement,” President Donald Trump spoke with his South Korean counterpart Moon Jae-in yesterday. Trump agreed to end the limit, imposed by a treaty between the two countries, on the payload that can be carried by South Korean missiles. In return, Moon gave the green light for the US to fully deploy its Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system. A White House statement said Trump gave “conceptual approval” to the sale of “many billions of dollars” worth of military equipment to South Korea.

Talks last week between US Defence Secretary James Mattis and South Korean Defence Minister Song Young-moo went far further. Speaking in South Korea’s National Assembly yesterday, Song said he suggested to Mattis that many people in South Korea were calling for the reintroduction of American “tactical” nuclear weapons in the country.

The US already can annihilate North Korea using nuclear missiles delivered by aircraft, warships and submarines. The installation of tactical nuclear weapons would put the Korean Peninsula on a hair trigger and dramatically heighten the danger of a mistake or miscalculation escalating into a nuclear exchange. At present, President Moon has ruled out the option.

Song indicated that he pressed Mattis to send long-range heavy bombers, aircraft carriers and other strategic assets more often to South Korea. The US has repeatedly dispatched strategic B-1 bombers over the Korean Peninsula as a warning to North Korea and last

week released photos of B-1 Lancers dropping bombs on a range near the border between the two Koreas.

Yesterday, the South Korean military carried out a drill involving F-15K fighter jets and surface-to-surface ballistic missiles to simulate a strike on North Korea’s nuclear test site. Major General Jang Kyung Soo claimed North Korea was preparing another missile test for as soon as September 9 and said South Korea planned another missile drill to show its “strong will and ability to respond.”

Last week, the South Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* reported that President Moon had ordered the military to formulate new war plans that “could quickly switch to an offensive posture in case North Korea stages a provocation that crosses the line or attacks the capital region.” The aim of the plan was to “infiltrate Pyongyang to quickly bring down the North Korean regime.”

In response to the US preparations for war, China and Russia are reinforcing their military positions. A lengthy article in the *Wall Street Journal* in July said the Chinese military had established “a new border defence brigade, 24-hour video surveillance of the mountainous frontier backed by aerial drones, and bunkers to protect against nuclear and chemical blasts.”

Both Russia and China have opposed the installation of THAAD batteries in South Korea, saying their high-power radars can peer deep inside their territories and undermine their nuclear deterrents. Russia’s deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov said yesterday Moscow would increase its missile presence in the Pacific in response to the expanded THAAD deployment in South Korea.

The chief responsibility for creating this explosive tinderbox in North East Asia is the Trump administration. Far from North Korea “begging for war,” the US is systematically goading Pyongyang into making a move that would create the pretext for, in the words of US Defence Secretary Mattis, a “massive military response” that would result in the country’s “total annihilation.”



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