

Trump announces aggressive sanctions against trade with North Korea

Mike Head

22 September 2017

Just two days after using the UN General Assembly as platform for a fascistic tirade, threatening to “totally destroy” North Korea, US President Donald Trump yesterday unveiled new sanctions threatening punitive penalties on countries and companies accused of having trade-related financial relations with Pyongyang.

Trump issued a sweeping executive order to cut off international financing of trade with North Korea. By targeting foreign banks and financial institutions, the order amounts to a virtual US-enforced embargo on trade with North Korea, backed by a threat of retaliation against any country whose companies are alleged to violate the ban.

This latest unilateral US escalation of sanctions, over and above the already punishing bans that the US pushed through the UN Security Council this month, escalates and widens the tensions that Washington is ratcheting up on the Korean Peninsula for its own predatory reasons.

The Trump administration’s move is clearly aimed primarily at China, which is alleged to account for 90 percent of North Korea’s trade, but can also threaten other countries, including Russia and the European powers.

“North Korea’s nuclear program is a grave threat to peace and security in our world, and it is unacceptable that others financially support this criminal, rogue regime,” Trump said menacingly. “Foreign banks will face a clear choice: do business with the United States or facilitate trade with the lawless regime in North Korea.”

These remarks again turn reality in its head. It is the US government, whose massive military spending and nuclear arsenal far outstrips any other country, and which has launched one aggressive war after another for the past quarter century, that presents the greatest

threat of war, not the primitive weapons capacity of the impoverished small state of North Korea.

Two days earlier, Trump issued a death threat to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and the Pyongyang regime. “Rocket man is on a suicide mission for himself and his regime,” Trump declared. “The United States is ready, willing and able.” By implication, this war-mongering threat now has been extended to anyone “facilitating trade” with North Korea.

Trump’s executive order strengthens the authority of the US Treasury to target any entity accused of providing North Korea with goods, services or technology. Trump said it would give the Treasury the “discretion to target any foreign bank knowingly facilitating specific transactions tied to trade with North Korea.”

The order hands US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin the power to sanction any state or body involved in a wide variety of North Korean industries, ports, trade and banking. Mnuchin stated: “This significantly expands Treasury’s authority to target those who enable this regime ... wherever they are located.”

A White House fact sheet said the new measures also bar any ship or aircraft from visiting the US within 180 days of going to North Korea. The same restriction would apply to any vessel involved in ship-to-ship transfers with North Korean vessels.

The US sanctions provocatively overrule the objections of China and Russia, and the concerns voiced by Germany and France, over the intensifying US threats against North Korea. Both China and Russia, which hold UN veto powers, acceded to the latest UN sanctions earlier this month, but opposed blanket banking restrictions that could cripple North Korea and trigger a destabilising economic and political

collapse.

White House officials frankly stated that the new sanctions are not designed to halt or deter North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile program. Washington's UN ambassador Nikki Haley declared: "It doesn't mean that it will necessarily change Kim's attitude."

Instead, the sanctions are intended to box the North Korean regime into an ever-tighter corner and provoke a military response that Washington could seize upon as the pretext for a potential nuclear strike. "We don't want war," Haley told reporters. Yet the US has always gone to war by falsely claiming to be responding to, or pre-empting, a military threat.

At the same time, the sanctions underscore the reality that the Trump administration's reckless escalation of the conflict with North Korea is part of a broader strategy aimed at undermining China, which is regarded by the US as the main obstacle to its regional and global hegemony.

Mnuchin claimed that "this action is in no way specifically directed at China." He said he called Chinese officials to inform them ahead of Trump's announcement. This denial, and the pointed communication with Beijing, only confirms that China is the central target.

Beijing already has been forced to move to head off the US sanctions. Reuters reported earlier in the day that China's central bank had ordered financial institutions to implement UN sanctions rigorously. In his usual gangster-like manner, Trump claimed this as a victory. He thanked China's President Xi Jinping and said the move was "very bold" and "somewhat unexpected."

On the same day, evidently reacting to the US pressure, the European Union announced new sanctions of its own, including a ban on investment in North Korea and on EU exports of oil.

Just two week ago, China and Russia voted for UN Security Council sanctions that limited fuel supplies to North Korea, imposed bans on North Korean workers overseas and prohibited the country's textile exports, its main source of foreign revenue. That followed another round of UN sanctions against Pyongyang in August.

For months, the US has dismissed "suspension-for-suspension" proposals by China and Russia, in which

the US would agree to halt its military exercises on the Korean Peninsula in exchange for North Korea suspending its missile and nuclear tests.

This rejection of any peace deal follows two decades in which successive US administrations have effectively torn up agreements previously struck with the North Korean regime.

The US belligerence was further underlined on Wednesday when the Trump administration threatened to rip up the 2015 civil nuclear accord signed with Tehran by US, Britain, France, Germany, the EU, Russia and China. Any repudiation of the Iran pact would also send another unmistakable signal of Washington's determination to block any deal with North Korea.

Beijing has not yet responded publicly to the latest US measures, but reacted with alarm to Trump's UN speech. A September 20 *People's Daily* op-ed stated: "The Korean Peninsula is on edge, made more so by words and actions that worsen tensions... Trump's political chest-thumping is unhelpful, and it will only push the DPRK [North Korea] to pursue even riskier policies, because the survival of the regime is at stake."

The editorial issued a plea: "Rather than throw more fuel on the fire and pressure China to defang the DPRK for its own selfish interests, the US should use its great power and influence to do more to break the spiral of escalation and engage the DPRK in dialogue."

That plea has fallen on deaf ears by a US administration whose belligerent threats of war and nuclear annihilation are heightening the danger of a devastating conflagration on the Korean Peninsula that would kill millions of people.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact