

Trump's threats against North Korea signify real danger of war

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Donald Trump continued his campaign of incendiary statements over the weekend, threatening to launch a war with North Korea that could unleash a nuclear catastrophe.

On Saturday afternoon, the US president tweeted that past administrations “have been talking to North Korea for 25 years.” This “hasn’t worked,” he wrote, adding: “Sorry, but only one thing will work!” Asked later to elaborate on what he meant, Trump replied, “You’ll figure that out pretty soon.”

These threats came three weeks after Trump’s tirade at the United Nations General Assembly September 19, when he declared that the US was “ready, willing, and able” to “totally destroy” North Korea, a country of 25 million people. Four days later, Trump threatened to assassinate the North Korean leader. If the North Korean foreign minister’s speech at the UN “echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man [Kim Jong-Un],” Trump wrote, “they won’t be around much longer!”

On Thursday, Trump organized a White House dinner with US military leaders, which had all the hallmarks of a meeting of a war cabinet. During a photo op before the dinner, Trump, surrounded by generals in military uniform, likened the moment to “the calm before the storm.” Asked what storm he was talking about, Trump would only say, “You’ll find out soon.”

To the extent that Trump’s words are interpreted as a genuine expression of the policy and plans of the United States government, the inescapable conclusion is that the world stands on the brink of the most devastating military conflict since the outbreak of World War II. Were language and reality in correct political alignment, the present situation would be described officially as an “Imminent danger of war.”

Republican Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, embroiled in a political conflict with Trump, warned that the president’s reckless threats were leading the United States “on the path to World War III.” But despite Corker’s statement on Sunday, there is, within the ruling elite and its media, a staggering disconnect between consciousness and

reality. The public declarations emanating from the White House are being reported by the media as if they will have no consequences. The thinking seems to be that Trump doesn’t mean what he says. The consequences of a war would prove to be so catastrophic that Trump is simply bluffing.

But what if he isn’t? What if the North Korean government takes the threats of the American president, as it must, seriously? With Trump having publicly declared that he will destroy North Korea and that the doomsday hour is fast approaching, how will the Pyongyang government interpret American military actions near the borders of its country? With only minutes to make a decision, will the regime view the approach of a US bomber toward North Korean airspace as the beginning of a full-scale attack? Will it conclude that it has no choice but to assume the worst and initiate a military strike against South Korea? Will it fire missiles, as it has threatened, in the direction of Japan, Guam, Australia, or even the United States?

From a purely legal standpoint, North Korea can claim, in light of Trump’s threats, that such action on its part would be an act of self-defense, a legitimate response to an imminent military threat.

Aside from the calculations of Pyongyang, one must assume that the regimes in Beijing and Moscow are also looking at the unfolding developments with increasing alarm. While the American media, as is its wont, responds complacently and thoughtlessly to Trump’s threats, the Chinese regime cannot avoid viewing them with deadly seriousness. Trump is, after all, the commander in chief of the American military. He has the power—which Congress has shown no interest in challenging—to order military actions.

A US attack on North Korea would pose an overwhelming threat to China. As in 1950, a war against North Korea would—even if it did not rapidly escalate into a nuclear exchange—lead inexorably to an American incursion across the 38th Parallel. The last time the US military crossed the border into North Korea, the Chinese responded with a

massive military counterattack. There is no reason to believe that the present-day regime in Beijing would remain passive in the face of a new US invasion of North Korea. It would view an American invasion as an unacceptable violation of a geopolitical arrangement on the Korean peninsula that has been in existence for nearly 65 years.

Beijing's reaction would be influenced by the already tense conditions that exist in the Asia-Pacific region. For years, the US has been systematically building up its military forces in the South China Sea under the "Pivot to Asia" initiated by the Obama administration. The purpose has been to militarily encircle China, which dominant sections of the ruling class consider the major competitor to US interests. Over the weekend, China's main regional competitor, Japan, declared that it fully backed Trump's threats against North Korea.

Thus, the outbreak of war between North Korea and the United States would inevitably involve China, which, in turn, would draw all of Asia, as well as Australia, into the bloody maelstrom. Nor would it be possible for Europe and Latin America, which have their own interests in Asia, to stand aside.

Little has appeared in the American media about the consequences of war with North Korea. An article in *Newsweek* in April concluded that a war would leave one million people dead, assuming that it did not involve the use of nuclear weapons or any other outside powers. In a comment in the *Los Angeles Times* last month, retired Air Force Brigadier General Rob Givens calculated that 20,000 South Koreans would die every day in a war on the peninsula, even without the use of nuclear weapons.

If the war were to develop into a nuclear exchange—as the Trump administration has threatened—the consequences would be catastrophic. In addition to the millions or tens of millions killed outright, climate experts warned in August that even a regional nuclear war would cool the planet by up to 10 degrees Celsius, potentially sparking a global nuclear winter that would wipe out agricultural production.

Despite all the evidence that war could break out at any time, the American media persists in its refusal to take the events seriously.

The *New York Times* epitomized this media effort at chloroforming the population in its October 6 article on Trump's remarks before the generals, which stated that Trump has a "penchant for provocative statements" and takes "an obvious delight in keeping people guessing." Writing as if what was involved was merely a matter of White House gossip and intrigue, the *Times* stated that the "timing" of the "calm before the storm" statement was "particularly tantalizing."

"But it is equally plausible," the article concluded, "that

Mr. Trump was merely being theatrical, using the backdrop of military officers to stir up some drama."

The efforts of the media to downplay the danger are contradicted by signs of serious divisions within the Trump administration. There are rumors that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will be forced out or could resign, following statements from Trump last month directly undermining Tillerson's moves to resume negotiations with the North Korean government. Thursday's meeting of top advisers in the White House, decked out in their uniforms, may have been an effort by Trump to ensure that he has the military on his side in advance of war.

These divisions, however, are tactical in character. In the final analysis, Trump speaks not simply for himself, but for the US ruling class. The dominant factions of the ruling oligarchy are united on the basic strategy of using its military force to maintain its hegemonic position abroad.

Trump uses exceptionally crude and brutal language to justify American foreign policy. But he is not the author of Washington's hegemonic strategy. The United States has been at war almost continuously for more than 25 years. This weekend marked the sixteenth anniversary of the invasion of Afghanistan. The Pentagon is conducting military actions all over the world, usually without the American people being informed of the deployment of military personnel. The death in combat this past week of four American soldiers in the African country of Niger came as a total surprise to the public.

A war with Korea could break out at any time. This is the reality of the situation. Rather than speculating idly over whether Trump is merely bluffing, the critical task is the building of a powerful movement, based on the working class, against the drive to war. The very fact that the American president smirks and laughs as he threatens millions with annihilation is itself sufficient proof that the US political system is terminally sick and capable of any crime.



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