

Trump designates North Korea as state sponsor of terrorism

Peter Symonds

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US President Trump has compounded tensions on the Korean Peninsula yesterday by putting North Korea back onto the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. The move paves the way for the imposition of new sanctions on the Pyongyang regime that will be announced today by the US Treasury.

The sanctions themselves are unlikely to have much impact as North Korea is already one of the most isolated countries in the world. Under intense US pressure, the UN Security Council has imposed a series of punitive measures that have banned the purchase of most of North Korea's exports and the use of North Korean guest workers and restricted energy imports. In addition, the US has imposed its own sanctions on Pyongyang and threatened secondary sanctions against any country that breaks them.

Speaking to reporters yesterday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson acknowledged that the practical implications of Trump's announcement would be limited, noting that it would "close a few additional loopholes." He rejected any suggestion that the move ended any prospect of talks with North Korea to end the standoff, saying "we still hope for diplomacy."

However, the redesignation of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism is another sign that the Trump administration has no intention of negotiating with the Pyongyang regime. As far as Washington is concerned, only North Korea's complete capitulation will prevent the US drive to war. The US demand for the complete and verifiable denuclearisation of North Korea means nothing short of the dismantling of its nuclear and missile programs and an ever-more intrusive inspection system that will be the basis for new provocations.

The timing of Trump's announcement is a slap in the face to China, which had just sent a top-level envoy, Song Tao, to North Korea for the first time in two

years. While no details were released, the two sides "exchanged views... on the situation on the Korean Peninsula and [the] region, and bilateral relations," according to the North Korean media.

During his Asian tour last week, Trump met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and pressed him to step up Chinese efforts to force North Korea to submit to US demands. Trump hailed the decision to send Song to Pyongyang by tweeting: "A big move, we'll see what happens!"

Trump's latest provocation against Pyongyang only adds to the pressure on China to completely isolate North Korea—a step that Beijing is reluctant to take. China's concern is that the US would exploit a political and economic crisis in North Korea to bring the country under American sway.

The only conclusion that Pyongyang can draw is that its redesignation is further evidence that the Trump administration has no interest in negotiations in good faith.

The removal of North Korea from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism by the Bush administration in June 2008 was part of a denuclearisation agreement reached in February 2007. Pyongyang kept its side of the bargain, shutting down its nuclear facilities and opening them up to international inspection. As a demonstration of good will, it demolished the cooling tower of its only nuclear reactor even though it was not immediately required under the agreement.

The Bush administration only reluctantly and belatedly removed North Korea from the State Department's list, as the first step towards what was meant to be the normalisation of relations between the two countries. Just months later, in September 2008, Bush effectively sabotaged the agreement by insisting

on more intrusive inspections that had not been part of the deal. The Obama administration never moved to revive talks on the 2007 agreement.

Washington's designation of countries as state sponsors of terrorism has always been used as a tool for provocations and diplomatic pressure, as well as being utterly hypocritical. US imperialism has a long history of promoting and exploiting terrorist groups to further its interests—as is currently the case in Syria where it is using Islamic extremist organisations in a bid to oust President Bashar al-Assad.

Not surprisingly, the criteria used by the US to designate a country as a state sponsor of terrorism are vague. Former State Department official Joseph DeThomas told the *Washington Post* yesterday that the process was “more of an art than a science” and “political and diplomatic context plays a considerable role in such designations.” In other words, branding a country as sponsoring terrorism is determined solely by US economic and strategic interests.

In his brief statement yesterday, Trump tried to justify his action by declaring: “In addition to threatening the world by nuclear devastation, North Korea has repeatedly supported acts of international terrorism, including assassinations on foreign soil.” This is presumably a reference to the killing of the brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore in February. “It should have happened a long time ago,” Trump added.

Unlike North Korea, the United States has waged one criminal war of aggression after another over the past 25 years. Speaking in the UN in September, Trump himself threatened to use US military might, including its massive nuclear arsenal, to “totally destroy” North Korea and potentially trigger a devastating world war.

Moreover, the US is directly responsible for the murder of the Iraqi and Libyan presidents, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, both of whom bowed to American demands to give up their so-called weapons of mass destruction. The Pyongyang regime can only conclude that a similar fate is in store if it capitulates to Washington. It is an open secret that the US and South Korea are training military “decapitation units” to assassinate top North Korean leaders.

Trump's designation of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism is another step towards a catastrophic war that would not only kill millions on

the Korean Peninsula but could potentially draw in major powers such as China and Russia. Top Trump officials have repeatedly warned that time is running out for North Korea to accept US demands and completely abandon its nuclear and missile programs.



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