

UN imposes harsh new sanctions on North Korea

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The UN Security Council yesterday voted 15-0 for a US-drafted resolution to inflict draconian new sanctions on North Korea following its testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) last month. Washington has been pushing for a complete economic blockade to starve the Pyongyang regime into submission.

The latest UN measures come on top of existing bans on the export of major North Korean exports such as coal, minerals and seafood, restrictions on the sale of oil to North Korea and the blacklisting of a number of North Korean officials and entities. The US has also imposed its own unilateral sanctions, aimed not just at North Korea but individuals and companies doing business with it.

The new sanctions include:

- Tougher restrictions on the import of energy products. A cap of 500,000 barrels will effectively cut the supply of North Korea's imports of refined petroleum products by roughly 90 percent. Crude oil supplies to North Korea will be capped at 4 million barrels a year, with further reductions to come into force if Pyongyang tests another ICBM or conducts a nuclear test.

- The repatriation of all North Koreans working abroad. The draft resolution initially imposed a 12-month deadline, but that was extended to 24 months after Russia and China objected. The US estimates there are about 100,000 North Korean guest workers, including 50,000 based in China and 30,000 in Russia, a vital source of foreign exchange for North Korea.

- A ban on North Korean exports of food products, machinery, electrical equipment, earth and stone, including magnesite and magnesia, wood and vessels. Combined with existing bans, this will choke off virtually all export trade.

- A ban on the sale of industrial equipment, machinery, transportation vehicles and industrial metals to North Korea.

- Another 15 North Koreans, along with the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces, have been added to the UN blacklist, which freezes their assets globally and bans them from international travel.

- UN member states will be able to seize, inspect and impound any vessel in their ports or territorial waters that they believe to be carrying banned cargo or involved in prohibited activities.

The resolution does not, however, permit the boarding and seizure of ships on the high seas as proposed by the Trump administration earlier this year—a provocative measure that could trigger a naval clash.

After the vote, Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, declared: “It sends the unambiguous message to Pyongyang that further defiance will invite further punishments and isolation.” But North Korea is already the most isolated country in the world.

White House Homeland Security adviser Thomas Bossert said earlier this week there were few things left to sanction. “President Trump has used just about every lever you can use, short of starving the people of North Korea to death, to change their behaviour,” he said. “And so we don't have a lot of room left here to apply pressure to change their behaviour.”

In reality, North Korea is already facing an economic and humanitarian crisis. UN human rights official Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein recently told the UN Security Council an estimated 18 million North Koreans, or 70 percent of the population, suffer from acute food shortages and aid agencies provide “literally a lifeline” for some 13 million.

While the Trump administration refers to

“diplomacy” and the possibility of talks, it will accept nothing short of North Korea’s complete capitulation to US demands for the dismantling of the country’s nuclear and missile programs, and highly intrusive inspections. By ramping up the confrontation with North Korea, the US is also seeking to undermine China, which it regards as the chief threat to global American dominance.

Wu Haitao, China’s deputy UN ambassador, said tensions on the Korean Peninsula risked “spiralling out of control” and again called for talks. “Only by meeting each other halfway and through dialogue and consultations can a peaceful settlement be found,” he said.

China and Russia have proposed a so-called freeze-for-freeze plan—a halt to US and South Korean military exercises in exchange for a pause in North Korean nuclear and missile testing—to facilitate negotiations. The US has repeatedly rejected the proposal.

China and Russia voted for the latest UN resolution in a bid to forestall a war on their borders by the US and its allies against North Korea. The Trump administration, however, has insisted that it will not tolerate a North Korea armed with a nuclear ICBM that can reach the United States and will use “all options” to prevent it.

The London-based *Telegraph* this week reported, based on three sources, that the White House had drawn up advanced plans for a pre-emptive attack on North Korea. Options included bombing a missile launch site before the next test and destroying a weapons stockpile.

“The Pentagon is trying to find options that would allow them to punch the North Koreans in the nose, get their attention and show that we’re serious,” an unnamed former US security official told the newspaper.

In the current tense situation, any incident or accident, let alone a deliberate US military attack, no matter how limited, threatens to trigger a war that would quickly engulf the Korean Peninsula and draw in other powers. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, would be killed.

Speaking at Guantanamo Bay on Thursday, US Defence Secretary James Mattis told US troops they had to be “ready to go” should “diplomacy” fail. He declared that North Korea was a “not yet imminent but a direct threat to the United States.”

“If we have to do it [militarily], we expect to make it the worst day in North Korea’s life,” he said. If war comes, “every submarine he’s [North Korean leader Kim Jong-un] got is to be sunk, and every ship he’s got is to be sunk.”

In an ominous indication of what the US is preparing, Mattis said the US had been able to trust that other nuclear powers, such as Russia and China, did not want nuclear war. When it came to North Korea, Mattis said, “that may be an assumption we cannot make.”

In other words, the US is preparing to wage a nuclear war, if necessary, to destroy North Korea and its small and technically-limited nuclear arsenal.



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