

US vice president foreshadows “toughest” sanctions on North Korea

Peter Symonds
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Ahead of his arrival in South Korea today, US Vice President Mike Pence made clear that Washington has no intention of softening its denunciations of North Korea or its campaign of “maximum pressure” on Pyongyang to force it to submit to US demands to denuclearise.

Pence’s aggressive remarks cut directly across any attempt by South Korean President Moon Jae-in to utilise the Winter Olympics, due to open tomorrow in South Korea, to create an opening for negotiations with North Korea.

Speaking on Wednesday in Tokyo, Pence emphasised there would be no let-up in the vilification of the Pyongyang regime. “We will not allow North Korea to hide behind the Olympic banner the reality that they enslave their people and threaten the wider region,” he declared.

The vice president used a press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to announce that the US would soon unveil “the toughest and most aggressive round of economic sanctions on North Korea ever—and we will continue to isolate North Korea until it abandons its nuclear and ballistic missile programs once and for all.”

Under pressure from Washington, the UN Security Council already has imposed crippling economic sanctions that ban major North Korean exports of minerals, garments and seafood, severely restrict energy imports and set a deadline for the repatriation of North Korea guest workers.

The US has imposed its own unilateral sanctions on North Korean individuals and entities, and taken measures against Chinese and Russian banks and companies that allegedly breached these bans. The targeting of Beijing and Moscow demonstrates that the US confrontation with Pyongyang is more broadly

aimed at two countries that Washington regards dangerous rivals.

Pence told the media: “Together with Japan, and all our allies, let the world know this: We will continue to intensify our maximum pressure campaign until North Korea takes concrete steps toward complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation.” This demand is for nothing less than Pyongyang’s complete capitulation—the dismantling of its nuclear arsenal and all related facilities and an ever-more intrusive inspection regime.

Abe indicated Japan’s complete support for Washington’s aggressive stance. He urged countries “not to be lured by the charm offensive of North Korea,” adding that the US and Japan are “100 percent on the same page” on North Korean policy.

Pence’s trip has deliberately highlighted US preparations for war with North Korea. His first stop was in Alaska to visit a US anti-ballistic missile base where another 20 ground-based interceptor missiles are due to be deployed. In Japan, he watched a military exercise involving the country’s anti-missile systems and attended a Defence Ministry briefing.

Pence reiterated President Trump’s belligerent stance. “The era of strategic patience is over. All options are on the table, and the United States has deployed some of our most advanced military assets to Japan and the wider region, to protect our homeland and our allies,” he said.

His visit comes amid growing signs that the Trump administration is getting ready to launch an illegal, pre-emptive attack on North Korea’s nuclear arsenal and facilities. Trump has repeatedly declared that he will not allow North Korea to develop a nuclear missile capable of hitting the American mainland—which CIA director Mike Pompeo says is now just “a handful of

months” away.

Pence’s press conference came barely an hour after South Korea’s Unification Ministry announced that Kim Jong Un planned to send his sister, Kim Yo Jong, as part of the North’s high-level delegation to the Olympic Games. Her presence, along with North Korea’s formal head of state Kim Yong Nam, opened up the possibility of informal talks with US officials.

Pence did not completely rule out talks but stressed that no concessions would be made to North Korea. “President Trump has said he always believes in talking, but I haven’t requested any meeting,” he said. “We’ll see what happens. But my message, whatever the setting, whoever is present, will be the same.”

Every aspect of Pence’s trip to South Korea is a slap in the face to North Korea, designed to undermine any prospect of negotiations. Tomorrow morning he is due to meet with North Korean defectors as he visits a memorial in Seoul to the sailors of the Cheonan, a South Korean corvette allegedly sunk by North Korea. His personal guest at the Olympics will be Fred Warmbier, the father of Otto Warmbier, the American student who died last year after being imprisoned in North Korea.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defence Secretary James Mattis yesterday echoed Pence’s aggressive remarks.

Speaking during a tour of Latin America, Tillerson warned: “Until North Korea gets on a pathway to giving up its nuclear weapons, this pressure and all these sanctions, and we’ve got more to come, are going to keep coming.” He downplayed the notion that Pence would meet with top North Korean officials, saying: “We don’t really anticipate anything.”

Tillerson dismissed the suggestion that North Korea’s participation in the Olympics signalled its willingness to negotiate. “We are not going to be lulled by the Olympic experience and North Korea marching with their South Korean... friends or family or whatever, and giving them a platform to put on their charm offensive. That isn’t going to change anything.”

Mattis sent a similar message. He told reporters in Washington that Pence was “quite capable of making the call” on whether to meet North Korean officials. Asked if war with North Korea was closer than when Trump took office a year ago, Mattis claimed that US policy was “firmly in the diplomatic lane,” but added

that it was backed by “viable military options.”

In reality, top Trump officials have stressed that time is running out for any peaceful end to the dangerous confrontation with North Korea. Washington will accept nothing less than North Korea’s surrender as the starting point for any negotiations. Pyongyang, however, has indicated its unwillingness to do so, given the fate of leaders like Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi after they bowed to US disarmament demands.

The stage is being set for a rapid escalation of tensions and US military provocations. Following the Winter Olympics, South Korea and the United States are due to commence massive war games involving hundreds of thousands of troops, backed by the latest weaponry.



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