

Trump uses Australian PM's visit to threaten North Korea

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US President Donald Trump yesterday exploited a joint press conference at the White House with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to once again menace North Korea with crippling economic sanctions and a military onslaught. Trump's comments come as the Winter Olympics in South Korea are about to close and the US and South Korea prepare for massive joint war games in April.

Speaking just hours after the announcement of tough new sanctions on North Korea, Trump warned: "If the sanctions don't work we'll have to go to phase two, and phase two may be a very rough thing." While not specifying what "phase two" might involve, he said it could be "very, very unfortunate for the world."

Trump and his top officials have repeatedly warned that military action will be necessary if North Korea does not capitulate to US demands to abandon its nuclear arsenal and submit to an intrusive inspection regime. CIA director Mike Pompeo declared, in late January, that North Korea was "a handful of months" away from having a nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile—something Washington has indicated is a red line for war.

In his comments, Turnbull said the US was Australia's "most important strategic and economic partner." He emphasised the military alliance between the two countries, saying it "is as close as it possibly could be and yet keeps getting closer." He noted that it was 100 years since Australian and American soldiers fought together in France in 1918, declaring: "A hundred years of mateship and a hundred more to come."

Turnbull's servile remarks, stressing the martial character of US-Australian ties, underscore the fact that his government is marching in lockstep with Washington into a war with incalculable consequences.

Trump announced that one of the US navy's new warships would be named the USS Canberra, as a symbol that the US had "no closer friendship" than with Australia. Turnbull responded obsequiously that this was a "very rare honour."

As the US has ramped up its confrontation, not just with North Korea, but with China, the Pentagon has come to regard northern Australia as a vital base for its military operations in Asia. Admiral Harry Harris, the head of US Pacific Command and an anti-China hawk, has been appointed US ambassador to ensure that Canberra is fully integrated into any war.

In his comments alongside Turnbull, Trump made clear that the US was targeting China, as well as North Korea. He pointedly said he would "love" to see Australian warships involved with the US navy in "freedom of navigation" operations to challenge Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea—exercises that threaten to provoke a direct clash with the Chinese military. While Turnbull's government to date has been wary, the *Australian* newspaper today indicated that the Defence Department had drawn up detailed plans for such an operation.

Earlier on Friday, the White House announced what Trump described as "the heaviest sanctions ever imposed" on a country. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin warned that the US was "putting companies and countries across the world on notice... Those who trade with North Korea do so at their own peril."

The latest bans add another 27 companies, 28 ships and one individual to the Treasury Department's blacklist, which blocks anyone dealing with them from conducting business in the United States. The ships are registered or flagged not only in North Korea, but also in China and seven other countries.

Mnuchin, who met with Turnbull, declared they had

“a very productive discussion on North Korea” and noted that “he’s very supportive and we’ve encouraged him to work with us on sanctions.” The two men have known each other for years—both were partners in the giant US investment bank Goldman Sachs.

Mnuchin refused to say whether the US sanctions ultimately would be enforced by a full naval blockade of North Korea. But he noted that UN Security Council resolutions allowed the US navy to board ships and inspect cargo with the consent of the country that flagged the vessel. The Trump administration has pushed in the UN for a resolution condoning the boarding and seizure of vessels on the high sea—itsself an act of war.

US Vice President Mike Pence, who signalled the latest sanctions earlier this month, defended his refusal to stand at the Winter Olympics when the joint North-South Korean team entered the stadium last weekend. He again blasted the Pyongyang regime on Thursday, declaring the United States “doesn’t stand with murderous dictatorships.” He warned: “We will keep standing strong until North Korea stops threatening our country, our allies or until they abandon their nuclear and ballistic missiles once and for all.”

Pence’s gesture at the Olympics, where he also snubbed top North Korean officials, cut across South Korean efforts to use the “peace games” to restart negotiations with Pyongyang. While not completely ruling out talks, the Trump administration has stressed that it will accept nothing less than North Korea’s complete surrender to US demands to denuclearise.

South Korea and the US have already announced that joint military exercises, delayed to allow North Korea to compete in the Olympics, will proceed next month. The huge annual war games, which last year involved more than 300,000 troops, backed by heavy weaponry, warships and the latest US bombers and fighters, will inevitably raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The drills are a thinly-veiled rehearsal for full-scale war with North Korea.

The scale of the catastrophe that Trump is preparing to inflict on North Korea was underscored by the comments of US Senator Jim Risch at the Munich Security Conference last weekend. Echoing Trump’s own warning last year of “fire and fury like the world has never seen,” Risch dismissed suggestions that the

US was planning a limited, pre-emptive strike—a “bloody nose”—to intimidate North Korea.

Risch declared that, if war started, “it’s going to be probably one of the worst catastrophic events in the history of our civilisation, but it is going to be very, very brief.” He continued: “The end of it is going to see mass casualties, the likes of which the planet has never seen. It will be of biblical proportions.”

Risch will attend the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics on Sunday as an official member of the US presidential delegation. He is also in line to become the next chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His bellicose remarks are a warning that the Trump administration is planning an all-out onslaught using conventional and/or nuclear weapons to “totally destroy” a country of more than 25 million people.



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