US blames China for renewed tensions with North Korea

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In rambling answers to journalists in Washington yesterday, US President Donald Trump responded to North Korea's warning on Monday that its leader Kim Jong-un could pull out of the planned June 12 summit between them. Echoing his threats last year to "totally destroy" North Korea, Trump implied that the country would face "total decimation" if no agreement is reached to end its nuclear weapons program.

Trump repeatedly blamed China and its president, Xi Jinping, for the renewed tensions with North Korea. He asserted: "I have a feeling… for various reasons, maybe including trade… it could be very well that he's influencing Kim Jong-un. We'll see what happens… The president of China, President Xi, could be influencing Kim Jong-un."

The North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) statement on Monday denounced the joint US-South Korean air force exercise "Max Thunder" as a "provocation" against its offer of talks on giving up its small arsenal of nuclear weapons. It declared that the military operations were part of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure and sanctions" policy and were unacceptable to Pyongyang.

The KCNA said North Korea was "suspending" further talks with South Korea and warned that Washington would have to "carefully contemplate" its conduct if it wanted the Trump-Kim summit to go ahead. The statement was a clear declaration that North Korea wants less categorical terms than "complete" denuclearisation before the US and its allies end economic sanctions and their constant military threats.

Throughout the week, the Trump administration downplayed North Korea's reaction and insisted that preparations for the summit are proceeding and the US was not altering its demands.

Trump stated yesterday: "Nothing has changed on North Korea that we know of. We have not been told anything… But we'll see what happens. If the meeting happens, it happens. And if it doesn't, we go on to the next step."

The only "next step" that the Trump administration has until now publicly contemplated is war. Trump repeated the ultimatum yesterday, declaring that, without unconditional denuclearisation by North Korea, "we're going to have a problem because we cannot let that country have nukes."

While issuing his threats, Trump, in his own crude fashion, indicated that the US and South Korea are offering major incentives to the North Korean regime. Washington's preferred perspective is not North Korea's destruction, but its transformation into an American client state that undermines Chinese strategic and military interests in East Asia.

The US agenda emerged into the open when journalists asked Trump about his national security advisor John Bolton's recent statement that US plans for North Korea are based on the "Libyan model." In the December 2003 pact between the Bush administration and the Libyan regime, Muammar Gaddafi agreed to give up Libya's chemical and nuclear weapons programs in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions and a guarantee it would not be attacked.

Libya faithfully abided by the agreement. Less than eight years after it was signed, however, the US and European imperialist powers instigated a civil war against Gaddafi and launched a devastating air war in March 2011 to overthrow his government. Gaddafi was hunted down and brutally murdered by pro-imperialist rebels on October 20, 2011.

Trump stated yesterday: "The Libyan model isn't a model we have at all, when we're thinking of North

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Korea. In Libya, we decimated that country… There was no deal to keep Gaddafi."

A "deal" with North Korea, he claimed, would be different. "It would be with Kim Jong-un. Something where he'd be there, he'd be in his country, he'd be running his country. His country would be very rich… this would be, really, a South Korean model in terms of their industry."

"Peace" on US and South Korean terms could see the North Korean regime remain intact, but give up its nuclear weapons and open up the North to capitalist investment. The border would remain sealed, with most of the population blocked from entering the South.

The North's working class would be offered up as brutally exploited and repressed cheap labour in special economic zones for South Korean and other corporations. The ruling clique, headed by Kim Jong-un and his family, would enrich itself as the corrupt "joint owners" of capitalist operations, as its Stalinist counterparts did in China and Vietnam.

China would face the continued basing of substantial US military forces in South Korea and Japan, including anti-missile systems that are part of the US strategy for launching a nuclear "first strike" in the event of war with Beijing. The highly-militarised North Korean state could become a pro-US threat on China's northern border, instead of serving as a buffer, as it has since the end of the 1950–53 Korean War.

Trump concluded with a chilling threat of what would happen if the North Korean regime rejects the offer that his administration and the South Korean ruling class has put on the table. "If you look at the model with Gaddafi," he blustered, "that was total decimation. We went in there to beat him. *Now that model would take place if we don't make a deal most likely* [with North Korea]. But if we make a deal, I think Kim Jong-un is going to be very, very happy." [emphasis added]

The Chinese regime is without any question seeking to cajole North Korea, with which it has a formal military alliance, not to "flip" into the US sphere of influence at its geostrategic expense. Two summits have been held between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un over the past month, along with other high-level talks. China has ample capacity to offer Pyongyang economic benefits, while also making threats of intervention if its interests are compromised.

China has substantial influence within the North Korean regime and military apparatus. A real possibility is that Pyongyang's suspension of talks with South Korea this week reflects sharp divisions within its ruling clique, and an implicit threat to Kim Jong-un and his inner circle of a Chinese-backed coup if they proceed towards a rapprochement with Washington.

The North Korean rhetoric suggests that the June 12 summit will not take place unless the Trump administration waters down its own rhetoric over denuclearisation.

On Tuesday, North Korean Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan declared that possession of nuclear weapons meant the "world knows too well that our country is neither Libya nor Iraq, which have met a miserable fate." Talks with South Korea and Washington, Kim stated, would not continue "if the US is trying to drive us into a corner and force our unilateral nuclear abandonment."

Any retreat by Trump, however, would trigger furious condemnations and accusations of appeasement in the American political and media establishment. It would further fuel the efforts by his ruling-class opponents to bring down his administration.

A volatile and dangerous diplomatic and military standoff has developed.

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