

As US applies “painful pressure” to North Korea

Tensions mount over South China Sea

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday drew a direct parallel between the threats being made by the Trump administration against Iran and North Korea, ratcheting up the tensions with China over the future of the strategic Korean Peninsula.

In his first official speech as secretary of state, Pompeo not only declared that the US would impose the “strongest sanctions in history” on Iran unless it bowed to all of Washington’s demands. He said similar measures would be likely if North Korea failed to strike a deal with the US. The offer of talks “has been accompanied by a painful pressure campaign and reflects our commitment to resolve this challenge forever.”

As Pompeo’s remarks underscore, Washington is threatening to walk away from the proposed June 12 meeting between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un unless Pyongyang accepts a deal that would transform it into a US client state on China’s border.

Recent statements by Trump and senior US officials have made it plain that the administration will not accept synchronised, step-by-step concessions in exchange for North Korea gradually giving in to demands to give up its nuclear program. Instead, Washington is demanding that the regime give up everything first, in return for promises of US and South Korean aid and investment.

US Vice President Mike Pence told Fox News on Monday: “It would be a great mistake for Kim Jong-un to think he could play Donald Trump.” Asked whether Trump was willing to abandon the summit if his terms are not met, Pence said: “There’s no question.”

Late last week, Trump warned North Korea it could go the way of Libya and Iraq and face “total decimation” if it refused to strike a deal. On the

weekend, his allies echoed those warnings of annihilation.

“President Trump told me three days ago that he wants to end this in a win-win way,” Senator Lindsey Graham told Fox News. “He thinks that’s possible, but if they pull out, [if] they play him, that we’re going to end North Korea’s threat to the American homeland in his first term and I’ll let you surmise as to what that might look like.”

The US president has also stepped up his charge that China is to blame for Kim’s threat last week to withdraw from the June 12 meeting if joint US-South Korean military exercises proceed, or if the US continues to insist that Pyongyang immediately abandon its nuclear program.

According to US media reports, Trump told aides that Kim’s stance was prompted by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who met with Kim in the north-eastern Chinese city of Dalian shortly before Kim’s statement. Trump reportedly said the issue had become entwined in the ongoing trade war standoff between Washington and Beijing.

On Monday, Trump tweeted that China must maintain the US-instigated sanctions on its neighbour. “China must continue to be strong & tight on the Border of North Korea until a deal is made,” he wrote. “The word is that recently the Border has become much more porous and more has been filtering in. I want this to happen, and North Korea to be VERY successful, but only after signing!”

Far from lessening the dangers of war, the US offer of talks with Kim has heightened the conflict with Beijing, which the Pentagon and US ruling class regard as the primary strategic threat to US hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region.

China appears to be responding with its own military

counter-moves. On Friday, China's military announced it recently practised the take-off and landing of several bombers, including the nuclear-capable H-6K, on an unspecified island in the sensitive South China Sea. A Twitter post by Beijing's official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, showed video of a long-range bomber taking off and landing on an island airstrip.

A Chinese Defence Ministry statement described the exercises as preparation for the "battle for the South China Sea." The purpose was to "improve our ability to 'reach all territory, conduct strikes at any time and strike in all directions,'" the statement read.

On Monday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang played down the exercise, while blaming the US for escalating the arms race in the region. "The islands in the South China Sea are China's territory," he said. "The relevant military activities are normal trainings and other parties shouldn't over-interpret them."

Lu continued: "As for the so-called militarisation mentioned by the US, what we do is fundamentally different from the US sending its military aircraft and warships from thousands of miles away to this region and posing a threat to other countries."

Under Trump, the US has intensified the Obama administration's military and strategic "pivot" or "rebalance" to the Pacific to combat China's rising influence, including by shifting 60 percent of US naval and air forces to the area. According to Pentagon statistics, the US has some 250 military sites encircling China, including in South Korea, Japan, Guam and Australia.

The Chinese bomber exercise triggered a new wave of allegations by the US and its allies against China. Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Logan told CNN: "China's continued militarisation of disputed features in the South China Sea only serves to raise tensions and destabilise the region."

The Australian government, Washington's closest ally in the region, took the same line. Defence Minister Marise Payne yesterday told the *Australian* she condemned Beijing's deployment of bombers. Denouncing China's "destabilising actions," she said her government had regularly expressed its concern to China at "ongoing militarisation" of islands.

Last month, the Pentagon provocatively claimed that China was already dominating the region's countries

and sea lanes. US Admiral Philip S. Davidson, nominated to head the US Pacific Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee during his confirmation hearing: "China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States."

These inflammatory charges are escalating the risk of a confrontation that could draw the Indo-Pacific into a devastating war for dominance. There is nothing progressive in the military measures of Beijing, which only play into Washington's hands and divide the Chinese and US working class from each other.

But, as the Trump administration's aggressive "America First" program highlights, the driving force behind the war preparations is the intensifying efforts by successive US governments to resort to military might to try and offset the country's economic decline.



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