

US seizes North Korean ship

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The Trump administration on Thursday escalated its provocations against North Korea, reigniting a potential flashpoint for war in East Asia just as the US stepped up threats of military intervention from Venezuela to Iran and the South China Sea.

President Donald Trump immediately ruled out returning to talks with North Korea after Kim Jong Un's regime carried out a second suspected short-range missile test in less than a week. "I don't think they're ready to negotiate," Trump said from the White House on Thursday. "We're looking at it very seriously right now. Nobody's happy about it," he added, referring to the latest North Korean missile test and indicating that retaliatory action was under consideration.

Trump said "the relationship continues," alluding to his two summits with Kim, at which he sought to push North Korea to break its ties with China and line up behind the US trade war and military offensive against Beijing.

Just before Trump's remarks, however, his administration took the confrontation with North Korea to a new level. The US Justice Department announced that it had seized North Korea's second largest cargo ship, alleging violations of the crippling US and UN sanctions imposed on the country.

In a statement, senior Justice Department officials called the seizure the first of its kind and said it was part of the US campaign to ramp up the pressure against the North Korean government. "This sanctions-busting ship is now out of service," said Assistant Attorney General John Demers, the head of the Justice Department's National Security Division. "We are deeply committed to the role the Justice Department plays in applying maximum pressure to the North Korean regime to cease its belligerence."

The Wise Honest is North Korea's second largest merchant ship and is capable of carrying tens of thousands of tons of cargo. Prosecutors said the ship

was used to haul heavy machinery into North Korea, including 412,584 kilograms of "steel plate."

The ship is being taken to American Samoa, according to Geoffrey Berman, the US attorney for the Southern District of New York, who spoke to reporters from the Justice Department on Thursday. Berman said the ship was "recently taken into custody," but declined to provide an exact date for the action. The ship was originally stopped by Indonesian maritime authorities in April 2018, and a US judge last July issued a warrant authorising its seizure.

Earlier this week, the US also announced it had suspended its effort to retrieve American remains from North Korea—an operation that had been touted as a harbinger of progress before Trump walked away from his second summit with Kim in February.

These developments indicate an aggressive reigniting of the US actions and threats against North Korea. They come amid heightening trade war tensions with China and the dispatch of two US warships to waters adjacent to China's Nansha (Spratly) Islands in the South China Sea—a military provocation that could lead to armed conflict.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cut short a European trip and returned to Washington for meetings on Iran and North Korea, a senior State Department official said on Thursday. Pompeo has played an increasingly belligerent role in recent months with regard to North Korea, as well as the other global conflicts being escalated by the US.

A North Korean foreign ministry official last month called for Pompeo to be removed from negotiations, saying he had been "letting loose reckless remarks and sophisms of all kinds against us every day." Pompeo asserted he was "still in charge" of diplomatic efforts.

The US seizure of the North Korean vessel is a particularly incendiary action. In the past, the North Korean regime has responded defiantly to efforts to

coerce it, declaring them to be “acts of war.”

According to South Korea’s joint chiefs of staff, the projectiles in the latest North Korean weapons test flew 260 miles (420 km) and 167 miles respectively. They said they were working with the US to determine more details, such as the type of weapon that was fired.

Pyongyang described the firing of rocket artillery and an apparent short-range ballistic missile on Saturday as a regular and defensive military exercise. It has not resumed testing the kind of longer-range, banned ballistic weapons it fired in 2017, suggesting that Kim is still holding out hopes of reaching an agreement with Trump.

But the US has refused to give Pyongyang any relief whatsoever from punitive sanctions imposed over its nuclear and missile programs. This week’s provocations demonstrate that the US has no intention of striking a deal unless it involves a total capitulation and embrace of Washington’s offensive against China.

On Wednesday, Trump provocatively rekindled a dispute with the South Korean government, which has sought to broker a US deal with the North in order to fully open up the Korean peninsula and the North’s working class to exploitation by South Korean companies.

Speaking at a political rally in Florida, Trump declared that South Korea was “rich as hell and probably doesn’t like us too much,” firing the latest shot in a conflict over how to share the cost of the huge US troop presence there.

Trump did not specifically name South Korea, but the dollar figures he cited match his previous complaints about Seoul. “I won’t say the country, but one country we spend a lot of money on defending—[in] very dangerous territory—and it costs us \$5 billion,” Trump said.

Trump added that he told “my people [to] call them and ask for the rest of it and they’ll pay. They’ll pay.”

As part of Washington’s intensifying global aggression, Trump has also criticised other US allies—including Japan and various NATO countries—for not paying enough of the cost of US troops on their soil. Facing a resurgence of struggles by teachers and other sections of the working class, the Trump administration and the US ruling class as a whole, including the Democrats, are turning to military confrontations to deflect mounting social tensions,

accompanied by increasingly authoritarian methods at home.



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