

US government and media ratchet up threats to North Korea

By Mike Head
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The Trump administration and the US corporate media are continuing to escalate the pressure on North Korea and China over the Pyongyang regime's missile and nuclear weapons tests, fuelling an extremely tense standoff and raising the danger of a devastating nuclear war.

On its evening news last night NBC reported that the United States is taking active measures to prepare for the possibility of a nuclear test by North Korea, including the deployment of U-2 spy planes, drones and special "sniffer" aircraft capable of detecting evidence of a nuclear explosion.

Two US intelligence officials told NBC News that North Korea is in a position to suddenly conduct a nuclear test. "We expect that they are able to do it at any time, without any real warning," one official said. "They have been engaging in steady preparations."

During a Thursday press conference with Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, US President Donald Trump branded North Korea a "menace" and suggested that China would take action against North Korea.

"As far as North Korea is concerned, we are in very good shape," said Trump. "I respect [President Xi Jinping] very much, and I think he's working very hard... Some very unusual moves have been made over the past two or three hours and I really have confidence that the president will try very hard."

As usual, Trump did not elaborate. His administration has been applying relentless pressure on Beijing—including threats of military strikes against North Korea that could initiate a full-scale war on China's border—to force Pyongyang to bow to Washington's demands to dismantle its nuclear and missile capacity. Trump has declared that if China cannot "solve North Korea," the US is prepared to go it alone, with "all options on the table."

Washington's ultimatum is being underscored by Vice President Mike Pence's current tour of Asia and Australia, reinforced by this month's US cruise missile strikes on Syria and its use of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb in Afghanistan. In South Korea, Pence cited the US attacks in Syria and Afghanistan, warning North Korea not to test America's "resolve."

The USS Carl Vinson and its accompanying guided-missile destroyers and cruiser—which Trump earlier declared to be part of an "armada" heading for Korea—are now due to arrive during possible North Korean tests marking Military Foundation Day on April 25.

The dangers of triggering a nuclear war that could draw in both China and Russia were further revealed by Reuters reports that Russia is moving heavy military equipment toward its border with North Korea.

According to Reuters, residents and local media in Russia's Far East reported large military convoys travelling in the direction of the border since the weekend, in what appeared to be contingency plans for a possible war that could directly threaten Russia's population and strategic interests.

A Russian military spokesman said the flurry of military activity was part of "routine" exercises, but the reports highlight Russia's own vulnerability, along with China's, to any conflict involving nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula.

Vladivostok, a city of 600,000 people and the home of Russia's Pacific Fleet, is just 160 kilometres from the North Korean border, and one of Pyongyang's nuclear test sites is close to the border. The radiation fallout from any nuclear explosion at the site, or attempted North Korean retaliation for a US strike, could imperil the city.

These developments demonstrate the risk that miscalculations or mistaken interpretations of military moves could trigger a conflict that could endanger the lives of millions of people. The Trump administration has deliberately added uncertainty to the crisis by leaking to the media that its “options” include a return of US nuclear weapons to South Korea, sabotage by special forces inside North Korea and “decapitation strikes” to kill North Korean leaders.

South Korean authorities, who are in the throes of a volatile presidential election campaign, added to the tensions yesterday. Just days after Pence visited the country, the acting South Korean president, Hwang Kyo-ahn, convened a meeting of senior officials where he repeatedly called for the military and security ministries to maintain vigilance.

At the same time, Seoul’s defence ministry pointed to the current large-scale US and South Korean air force exercise, codenamed Max Thunder. “We are conducting a practical and more intensive exercise than ever,” South Korean pilot Colonel Lee Bum-chul told reporters. “Through this exercise, I am sure we can deter war and remove our enemy’s intention to provoke us.”

The North Korean regime is resorting to blood-curdling threats of its own, evidently in an attempt to deter a US attack. The *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the North’s ruling Workers’ Party, said in an editorial on Thursday: “In the case of our super-mighty preemptive strike being launched, it will completely and immediately wipe out not only US imperialists’ invasion forces in South Korea and its surrounding areas but the US mainland and reduce them to ashes.” Such rhetoric only plays into the hands of the US ruling elite, and divides North Korean workers from their fellow workers in the South and America.

The Chinese leadership is desperately sending out warnings of the war danger and appealing to the Trump administration for an accommodation. A commentary in the state-run *People’s Daily* yesterday pointed to the possible consequences of a preemptive strike by the US, saying there was “no guarantee” that “the presumed US strike would be precise enough to wipe out all nuclear facilities in the DPRK before Pyongyang launches a nuclear attack in retaliation.”

The comment continued: “If that happens, the DPRK

won’t wait to fire its nuclear missiles, and thousands of howitzers and rocket launchers deployed along the 38th parallel Military Demarcation Line into the Republic of Korea. No defense systems, including the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system, will be able to shield off such a shower of artillery shells. And Pyongyang’s missiles could destroy Seoul and hit even Japan.”

The commentary urged the US to consider a Chinese proposal for “suspending hostilities.” As a first step, the North would freeze its nuclear program if, in exchange, the US halted its military exercises with the South.

Another *People’s Daily* commentary signalled the Chinese bureaucracy’s wider plea for a partnership with Washington. “China has no intention of competing with the US for the position of ‘top superpower,’” it stated, appealing for “win-win cooperation.”

Washington, however, has rejected any suggestion of resuming talks with Pyongyang, asserting that the days of “strategic patience” are over. The Trump administration’s “America First” program is dedicated to reasserting US global economic and hegemony at all costs.

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