

Amid high tensions, UN votes for harsh sanctions on North Korea

By Peter Symonds
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Under heavy pressure from the Trump administration, the UN Security Council voted unanimously on Saturday for a resolution imposing punitive new sanctions on North Korea over its two long-range missile tests last month. The sanctions, which will hit North Korea hard, will compound the tense confrontation on the Korean Peninsula that threatens to descend into war.

Unlike previous UN resolutions which were narrowly targeted against Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, the latest is broadly aimed at economically crippling the North Korean economy. It imposes outright bans on North Korean exports of coal, iron, lead and seafood which is estimated will slash export income by about \$1 billion or a third of the total.

The resolution also prohibits countries from hiring extra North Korean workers and bans new joint ventures with North Korea or any new investment in current joint enterprises. It adds nine individuals and four business entities to the UN's blacklist for travel bans and asset freezes. This includes North Korea's state-owned Foreign Trade Bank that functions as the country's primary foreign exchange bank.

US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley bragged that the resolution imposed "the most stringent set of sanctions on any country in a generation," telling Fox News later that "we basically gave them a kick in the gut ... that they are going to begin to feel right away."

Speaking at the UN, Haley praised China for supporting the resolution, but warned: "We should not fool ourselves into thinking we have solved the problem. Not even close. The North Korean threat has not left us, it is rapidly growing more dangerous. Further action is required."

The US dramatically ramped up the pressure on China following North Korea's launch of a long-range

ballistic missile on July 28 that could potentially reach the American mainland. President Trump blasted Beijing for doing "nothing for us on North Korea" and warning that "we will not allow this to continue."

The Pentagon carried out one show of military force after another—joint live fire exercises with South Korea, including launching missiles into the sea, were followed by despatch of two strategic B1 bombers over the Korean Peninsula. Last Wednesday, the US tested its own intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) over the Pacific—its fourth test launch this year.

The US threat of a war on China's doorstep was compounded by leaks last week that the Trump administration was preparing trade war measures against China over the issue of intellectual property rights. US trade penalties against China now appear to have been put on hold.

Trump, who is currently on vacation, tweeted his approval of the UN resolution, declaring the sanctions will have a "very big financial impact" on North Korea. He also praised China and Russia for supporting the new sanctions.

Beijing, however, is continuing to push its own proposal for restarting talks with North Korea—a halt by Pyongyang of its nuclear and missile testing, and, in return, a freeze by the US and South Korea on their major joint military exercises. Washington has repeatedly rejected any halt to these drills, which amount to a rehearsal for war with North Korea.

China's ambassador to the UN, Liu Jieyi, also reiterated Beijing's opposition to the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea. While nominally aimed against North Korea, the THAAD installation allows the US military to peer deep inside Chinese territory. Washington has ruled out any halt to

the deployment.

China's foreign minister Wang Yi met with his North Korean counterpart, Ri Wong-ho, at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Manila over the weekend. He told the media that he had warned Pyongyang: "Do not violate the UN's decision or provoke the international community's goodwill by conducting missile launching or nuclear tests."

Wang, however, also urged "other parties like the US and South Korea to stop increasing tensions." He said that sanctions were not an end in themselves, emphasising that "the goal is to bring the Korean peninsula nuclear issue back to the negotiation table and to seek a final solution through negotiation."

At Beijing's insistence, the UN resolution called for all sides to return to six-party talks involving the US, China, the two Koreas, Japan and Russia. But these negotiations have been effectively dead since US President George W. Bush undermined a 2007 agreement for North Korea to denuclearise by demanding extra inspections and safeguards. The Obama administration never moved for the resumption of the six-party talks sponsored by China.

Last week, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested that the US might be prepared to negotiate with North Korea. "We do not seek a regime change, we do not seek the collapse of the [Pyongyang] regime, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula, we do not seek an excuse to send our military north of the 38th parallel [dividing the two Koreas]," he told reporters.

At the same time, Tillerson made unmistakably clear that talks would be possible only if North Korea was prepared to give up its nuclear weapons. Negotiations, he said, could "only be achieved by denuclearising, giving up their weapons of mass destruction," and that "only then will we be prepared to engage them in talks."

Tillerson, who is also in Manila, met with Wang as well as the South Korean and Japanese foreign ministers. But no official talks took place between American and North Korean representatives at the ASEAN summit. Indeed, the US made a failed attempt to have North Korea's membership of the forum suspended.

As a result, the prospect for talks is slim. North Korea

has declared itself to be a nuclear state and insists that it will continue to build a nuclear arsenal. A commentary in the state-owned *Rodong Sinmun* warned the US to give up its "hostile policy" and threatened to sink the US mainland in "an unimaginable sea of fire" if it attacked the country.

Such belligerent but empty threats play directly into Washington's hands as it exploits the crisis on the Korean Peninsula to accelerate its military build-up in the Asia Pacific aimed not primarily against North Korea, but rather against China, which the US regards as the main challenge to its regional and global dominance.

In an MSNBC interview yesterday, Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, stated that it was "impossible to overstate the danger" posed by North Korea and again declared that all options, including military strikes, were on the table. He acknowledged that it "would be a very costly war ... [in] terms of the suffering of mainly the South Korean people," but did not back off from the threat and noted that the US president had been "deeply briefed."

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