

# The US on the brink of war with North Korea

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Amid accelerating US preparations for conflict with North Korea, yesterday's night-time flight by two B-1B bombers over the Korean Peninsula was designed to provoke a North Korean response that could be used as the *casus belli* for all-out war.

The supersonic bombers were joined by Japanese and South Korean fighter jets for the first joint night-time training exercise that involved practicing air-to-ground missile drills in waters off the east coast of South Korea, then off the west coast. This rehearsal for war with North Korea followed another first when two B-1B bombers late last month flew the furthest north along the North Korean coast since the start of this century.

At the same time, the Pentagon is assembling a naval armada off the Korean Peninsula. The nuclear attack submarine USS *Tuscon* arrived off South Korea on Saturday. The aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* and its strike group of cruisers and destroyers is due to arrive later this month for joint exercises with the South Korean navy. Two Australian frigates are also en route to Korean waters.

The Trump administration's relentless campaign of bellicose threats and military provocations makes clear that the danger of a catastrophic war, which could drag in major powers such as China and Russia and escalate into a nuclear exchange, is real and imminent. As he faces a mounting political crisis at home, the US president may see a war with North Korea as a means of shoring up his administration and crushing domestic political opposition.

From the standpoint of military logic, the US has deliberately placed the Pyongyang regime in an impossible situation. In his fascist rant at the UN last month, Trump declared that North Korea confronted "total destruction" unless it capitulated completely to US demands. He flatly ruled out any negotiations with Pyongyang when he rebuked Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for "wasting his time" in sending out

diplomatic feelers.

North Korea's foreign minister responded to Trump's UN speech by declaring that it amounted to a declaration of war and warned that his country had the right to take countermeasures, including the shooting down of US strategic bombers in international airspace. Yet the Pentagon has continued to send B-1Bs to conduct war games in close proximity to North Korea.

Confronted with the most powerful military on the planet armed to the teeth with thousands of nuclear weapons, the Pyongyang regime could conclude that it has to attack first, including with its limited nuclear arsenal, before its military is totally destroyed. Each B-1B flight poses the immediate question to the generals in Pyongyang: is this another drill, or the start of an all-out attack?

In Washington, the military is being prepared and primed for war against North Korea. In a keynote speech to top army officers on Monday, Defence Secretary James Mattis insisted that the military had to be "ready to ensure we have military options that our president can employ if needed."

The Army Association paraphrased General Robert Abrams, commander of US Army Forces Command, who spoke at the same event as saying, "Sending American forces to fight a World War II-style all-out war would mean facing a harsh reality: Troops will die, and in large numbers."

Mattis and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Dunford met with Trump on Tuesday to review military options, including "to prevent North Korea from threatening the United States and its allies with nuclear weapons." In other words, the Trump administration is on the brink of an illegal war of aggression on the pretext that its small nuclear arsenal poses a threat to the US.

A US attack on North Korea would inevitably lead to a confrontation with China and Russia which have repeatedly called for an easing of tensions and a return

to negotiations. A war on their borders and the installation of a US puppet regime in Pyongyang cuts directly across their strategic interests in Asia. Moreover, the subjugation of North Korea is part of Washington's far broader ambition to undermine, encircle and, if necessary, go to war with China to ensure American hegemony in Asia and the world.

Trump has accelerated the Obama administration's so-called "pivot to Asia" against Beijing on every front—diplomatically, economically and militarily. He has strengthened US ties throughout the region, threatened China with trade war and confronted Beijing militarily not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in the South China Sea. On Tuesday, a US navy destroyer carried out another provocative intrusion near China's Paracel Islands to challenge Beijing's "excessive maritime claims."

The US drive to war is not simply the product of the fascist President Trump. Rather he is the expression of the deepening political, social and economic crisis of American imperialism which has desperately sought to arrest its historic decline through its aggressive use of military might. Having created one disaster after another in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa, Washington is upping the ante and preparing for a direct conflict with its major rivals, China and Russia in the first instance.

The danger of war is further heightened by the immense turmoil and conflicts within the American political establishment, including in the White House, and more broadly, popular opposition to war and austerity. Trump is publicly at odds with both Tillerson and Mattis, who have suggested that diplomatic efforts need to be exhausted before any attack on North Korea—not because they are opposed to war, but because they fear the immediate eruption of a mass anti-war movement in the event of undisguised US aggression.

The bitterness of the infighting was underscored when a well-sourced NBC article last week revealed that Tillerson had threatened to resign and called Trump "a moron" following a top-level Pentagon meeting.

On Wednesday, NBC reported that what prompted Tillerson to make that remark was a proposal by Trump to increase the number of US nuclear weapons ten-fold, which would put the US in violation of all existing

nuclear treaties and effectively render it a pariah state.

In a chilling expression of the type of crackdown that could be imposed in the context of a further escalation against North Korea, Trump threatened in a tweet to suspend NBC's broadcasting license over the story.

The deep divisions in American ruling circles that are fuelling speculation about Trump's impeachment were summed up in a *Washington Post* editorial on Tuesday entitled "What to do with an unfit president."

Far from halting the drive to war, the political crisis only adds to the danger. Beset with conflict at home, Trump is being propelled to extricate himself by seeking to project political and social tensions outwards against a foreign foe. His critics and opponents are not opposed to war—many are criminally culpable for the US acts of aggression over the past 25 years. The differences are purely tactical—how to attack and who to attack first.

Without the development of a mass anti-war movement of the working class in the United States and internationally, war is not only possible but inevitable. Such a movement cannot be based on appeals to the powers-that-be, but rather on a revolutionary socialist perspective to abolish the diseased capitalist order that threatens to drag humanity into the abyss.

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