

Will there be a US nuclear sneak attack on North Korea?

By Bill Van Auken
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Under the cover of the pre-Winter Olympics thaw between North and South Korea and the momentary lull in the “fire and fury” rhetoric from the Trump White House, there are growing signs that the Pentagon and the CIA are pressing ahead with preparations for a preemptive war against North Korea, including the use of nuclear weapons.

There have been multiple reports in the American corporate media of behind-the-scenes discussions between the US military and intelligence apparatus and the Trump administration of the feasibility of a so-called “bloody nose” attack, involving US air strikes on North Korean nuclear facilities, with the expectation—however ill-founded—that they would not provoke a full-scale war.

In a rare public speech, CIA Director Mike Pompeo hinted obliquely at these plans. Speaking before the right-wing think tank American Enterprise Institute Tuesday, Pompeo warned that Pyongyang was a “handful of months” away from achieving the capability of staging a nuclear attack against the US mainland.

The CIA director said that Washington was “going to foreclose that risk” and “denuclearize permanently” North Korea.

While asserting that the Trump administration was committed to a “solution through diplomatic means”—a claim belied by Trump’s chiding of his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson last October for “wasting his time” by seeking negotiations with the government of Kim Jung Un—Pompeo said that the CIA was working with the Pentagon to “prepare a series of options to make sure that we can deliver a range of things so the president will have the full suite of possibilities.”

He added that he would “leave to others to address the capacity or the wisdom of a preemptive strike.”

The issue of “capacity,” however, is already being decided through a series of ominous actions taken by the US military.

Earlier this month, the Air Force deployed six B-52H Stratofortress bombers along with 300 Airmen from Barksdale Air Base in Louisiana to Guam to replace six B-1B Lancer bombers. The positioning of the B-52s, which unlike the B-1B bombers are capable of delivering nuclear weapons, marks a major escalation.

“The B-52H’s return to the Pacific will provide [US Pacific Command] and its regional allies and partners with a credible, strategic power projection platform,” the Air Force said in a statement. “The B-52 is capable of flying at high subsonic speeds at altitudes up to 50,000 feet and can carry nuclear or precision guided conventional ordnance with worldwide precision navigation capability. This forward-deployed presence demonstrates the continued commitment of the US to allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region.”

A week earlier, the Pentagon deployed three B-2 nuclear-capable stealth bombers to the Guam air base.

The deployments mark the first time in nearly two and a half years that all three bombers—the B-52s, B-2s and B-1Bs—have been assembled together in Guam, only 2,200 miles away from targets in North Korea.

The Bloomberg News agency reported Wednesday that the US Air Force “deployed an upgraded version of the U.S.’s largest non-nuclear bomb—a 30,000-pound “bunker buster” that can only be carried by the B-2 stealth bombers now based in Guam.”

The weapon, which is larger than the so-called Mother of all Bombs (MOAB) dropped on Afghanistan last April “could be used if the US decided to hit underground nuclear missile facilities in North Korea,” Bloomberg reported

Meanwhile, the USS Carl Vinson, a US Navy Nimitz-class supercarrier, together with its accompanying strike group of guided-missile destroyers and other warships, departed from San Diego earlier this month and is scheduled to arrive off the Korean peninsula in advance

of the Winter Olympic Games set to begin in Pyeongchang, South Korea on February 9. It will join the USS Ronald Reagan carrier battle group already deployed in Japan.

The USS Wasp, a 40,000-ton miniature aircraft carrier, is now operating from Japan, carrying F-35B jets, the Pentagon's most advanced warplanes, which are capable of carrying B61 thermonuclear gravity bombs, a ground-penetrating bunker buster weapon that could be used against underground nuclear and command and control facilities in North Korea.

Alongside this buildup of nuclear strike forces, US ground and airborne troops have been rehearsing for an invasion at bases throughout the United States, while 1,000 Army reservists have been called up for active duty to man "mobilization centers" used for the rapid movement of troops overseas.

These feverish military preparations are taking place as South Korea has persuaded Washington to call off planned joint military exercises on the Korean peninsula itself, which Pyongyang had denounced as a provocation and preparation for invasion.

The South Korean government of President Moon Jae-in has used the upcoming 2018 Olympics Winter Games to resume dialogue with North Korea, which has agreed to send a large delegation to the games, with North and South Korean women ice hockey players joining for the first time in a unified team.

Kim Jong-un issued a conciliatory statement Thursday calling for all Koreans "at home and abroad" to work to "rapidly improve north-south relations" and for a "breakthrough for independent reunification."

In Davos, meanwhile, South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said at a news briefing, "The nuclear issue has to be solved through negotiations and diplomatic endeavors. This idea of a military solution is unacceptable."

She declined to comment when asked if Washington had given Seoul clear assurances that it would not carry out a unilateral military strike. She added, "This is our fate that is at stake. Any option that is to be taken on the Korean peninsula, cannot be implemented without us going along."

It is by no means clear, however, that the Trump administration has given Seoul any veto power over US military action. There is no doubt that Washington views the talks between Seoul and Pyongyang as a threat to its policy of "maximum pressure" against North Korea and a potential obstacle to its preparations for war. Far from

decreasing the US war drive, any move toward accommodation between Seoul and Pyongyang is likely to only increase the pressure within the US ruling establishment and its military and intelligence apparatus to resolve the issue by means of military aggression.

Amid the US military buildup, the US government Wednesday rolled out a new round of sanctions aimed at strangling North Korea's economy. These latest sanctions targeted nine entities, 16 individuals and six North Korean ships. Among those on the sanction list were two China-based trading firms.

Beijing reacted with hostility to the new sanctions. "China resolutely opposes any country using its own laws to carry out long-arm jurisdiction on Chinese companies or individuals," a foreign ministry spokesperson said.

The continuing danger of war on the Korean peninsula, which carries with it the threat of a nuclear conflagration that could claim the lives of millions, was cited Thursday by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in moving its so-called Doomsday Clock, which it has maintained since 1947, 30 seconds forwards, to two minutes to midnight. This is only the second time in more than seven decades that the group has assessed this grave a threat of nuclear war.

It also cited the Trump administration's threat to upend the Iran nuclear deal and rising tensions between the US and Russia, the world's two largest nuclear powers. It called attention as well to the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review which seeks to "increase the types and roles of nuclear weapons in US defense plans and lower the threshold" for their use.

The administration and the Pentagon have also recently issued a National Security Strategy and a National Defense Strategy, which spell out a fundamental shift in US strategy, replacing the two-decade-old "global war on terror" with the preparation for "great power" conflict and world war, in which an emphasis is placed on the buildup of Washington's nuclear arsenal.

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