

Top US intelligence official declares “decision time” on North Korea coming closer

By Peter Symonds
14 February 2018

The US Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, warned yesterday that time is running out for any peaceful resolution of the confrontation with North Korea. He told the Senate Intelligence Committee that Pyongyang poses a “potentially existential” threat to the United States and it is likely that North Korea will conduct more weapons tests this year.

The Trump administration has repeatedly declared that all options are on the table, including military attacks, to prevent North Korea from building a nuclear missile capable of hitting continental America. Trump himself has made bellicose warnings, including that he would “totally destroy” the small, economically backward country if it threatened to launch nuclear weapons against the US.

Coats told the committee North Korea had made repeated statements that nuclear weapons were necessary for its survival, suggesting its leaders “do not intend to negotiate them away.” While reiterating the Trump administration’s intention to apply “maximum pressure,” he declared: “Decision time is becoming ever closer in terms of how we respond to this.”

These remarks follow US Vice President Mike Pence’s trip to Asia that included South Korea, where he held talks with President Moon Jae-in and attended the Winter Olympics opening ceremony last Friday. Speaking in Tokyo before his arrival, he said the US would soon announce “the toughest and most aggressive round of economic sanctions on North Korea ever” and poured scorn on North Korean efforts to ease tensions through the Olympics.

Pence deliberately snubbed top North Korean officials—Kim Yo-jong, the sister of leader Kim Jong-un, and Kim Yong-nam, the country’s formal head of state. He skipped a dinner attended by Kim Yong-nam, as well as officials and leaders attending

the Olympics from other countries. In a display of imperial arrogance, he refused to stand when the joint North-South Korean team appeared during the opening ceremony.

Kim Yo-jong brought a message from her brother offering to hold a summit with Moon “at an early date.” As reported by a presidential spokesman, Moon responded: “Let’s create conditions to make it happen.” The cautious character of Moon’s response was underscored on Sunday when South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon told the media that any summit would require the “right conditions.”

In his talks with Kim Jong-un’s sister, Moon made clear that the US would have to be involved in any rapprochement between the two Koreas. “The early resumption of dialogue between the US and North Korea is absolutely necessary for the development of inter-Korean relations,” he reportedly told Kim Yo-jong.

The US has repeatedly insisted that negotiations on the dangerous standoff on the Korean Peninsula will occur only if Pyongyang capitulates to US demands to abandon its nuclear arsenal, dismantle its nuclear and missile facilities and allow ever-more intrusive inspections of its industrial and military apparatus.

Moon, who won the South Korean presidency last year by pitching to widespread anti-war sentiment, has publicly espoused talks with North Korea as a means of easing tensions and averting the danger of a disastrous conflict. At the same time, he has been careful not to alienate the Trump administration or the powerful military-intelligence apparatus in South Korea, which has strong links to the US and is hostile to any concessions to North Korea.

Moon bowed to US pressure last year to fully deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD)

anti-missile system in South Korea despite condemnations from North Korea and China. In doing so, he broke a key electoral promise.

North Korea's offer to hold a summit with Moon is clearly aimed at dividing South Korea from the United States. Both Pence and US Defence Secretary James Mattis have stressed that there are no differences between the US and South Korea. "I know that people are watching for a wedge... there's no wedge there," Mattis said, adding there was strong co-ordination between the two countries.

In an interview with the *Washington Post* on his flight back to Washington, Pence hinted that the US could consider holding direct talks with North Korea. He emphasised that the campaign of "maximum pressure" on North Korea would remain until it made major concessions to US demands for denuclearisation. "So the maximum pressure campaign is going to continue and intensify," he said. "But if you want to talk, we'll talk."

Genuine negotiations, however, remain unlikely. Pence used his meetings with President Moon to insist that South Korea make no concessions to North Korea. As reported by the *Washington Post*: "Moon assured Pence he would tell the North Koreans clearly that they would not get economic or diplomatic benefits for just talking—only for taking concrete steps toward denuclearisation."

Following the Olympics, the US and South Korea will go ahead with massive joint military exercises that last year involved more than 300,000 troops, backed by sophisticated warplanes and warships, in a thinly disguised rehearsal for war with North Korea. The US has been bolstering its military forces in East Asia, placing nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers on Guam and indicating that Marine Expeditionary Units, previously deployed to the Middle East, will be positioned in the Asia Pacific.

Speaking at yesterday's Senate Intelligence Committee hearing, CIA director Mike Pompeo said he saw "no indication there's any strategic change" by the North Korean regime in its efforts to build a nuclear arsenal. In January, he declared that Pyongyang was a "handful of months" away from having a nuclear missile able to hit the United States.

Pompeo's comments yesterday are a further indication that the Trump administration is engaged in

advanced preparations for attacking North Korea. He confirmed that the CIA had assessed how North Korea would react to a pre-emptive US strike. "We have written about various forms of actions," he said, adding that the intelligence community had also measured "the certainty and uncertainty we have around that analysis."

Asked to elaborate further, Pompeo demurred, saying: "I would prefer to share that with you in closed session this afternoon."

What the Trump administration is actively considering is an unprovoked and illegal act of military aggression that could quickly escalate into a catastrophic war that would drag in nuclear-armed powers such as China and Russia.

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