

US ramps up threats to China and North Korea

By Mike Head
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Defense Secretary James Mattis and other senior Pentagon officials issued military and economic threats against China last weekend, and also toughened Washington's demands on North Korea.

Speaking at the annual Shangri-La strategic forum in Singapore, Mattis accused Beijing of waging "intimidation and coercion" against other countries by "militarising" islets in the South China Sea. China would face "larger consequences" from the US, he asserted, including financial ones.

US President Donald Trump, backed the remarks by his Pentagon chief, tweeting on Saturday: "Very surprised that China would be doing this?"

Mattis also declared North Korea would receive no relief from sanctions until it had demonstrated "verifiable and irreversible" steps to denuclearisation. And US troops would remain in South Korea regardless of the outcome of next week's possible summit between the US and North Korean leaders.

Mattis's comments followed a provocative declaration last Thursday by Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie, the Pentagon's director of the Joint Staff. Asked by a reporter if the US could "blow apart" one of China's man-made islands, he said: "I would just tell you that the United States military has had a lot of experience in the Western Pacific taking down small islands."

These remarks, referring back to World War II, underscore the reality that the June 12 talks between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, if they proceed, are not about peace on the Korean Peninsula. Whatever the outcome, the US military and trade war confrontation with China, intended to reassert Washington's post-World War II hegemony over the region, will escalate.

If the North fails to fall into line with Washington's demands, the complete destruction of North Korea will be on the table, setting the stage for a wider war between the

US and China. If, on the other hand, the North moves toward an accommodation with the US, threatening China's strategic interests, that will only intensify the underlying conflict between the US and China.

At the Singapore gathering, Mattis said the Trump administration's recent decision to disinvite China from a multinational naval exercise in the Pacific this northern summer was just an "initial response" to Beijing's island activity. Mattis called the US action a "relatively small consequence. I believe there are much larger consequences in the future."

Mattis also said the "steady drumbeat" of US naval operations in the South China Sea would continue. On May 27, the US Navy sailed two warships within 12 nautical miles of the disputed Paracel Islands. It was the first time the Pentagon has used more than one vessel in the operations, conducted under the flag of "freedom of navigation" in the highly strategic waters.

The US warships were reportedly challenged by Chinese naval vessels, highlighting the danger of a clash that could trigger a war.

Mattis's comments drew a pointed reaction from a Chinese official at the meeting. Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo said a US move to send the two warships into China's "territorial waters" was an "obvious provocation to China's national security and territorial integrity."

Mattis's speech was part of a concerted offensive against both China and North Korea. During Thursday's press briefing, McKenzie said he would not compare the threats posed to the US by China and North Korea, but "we are prepared for both."

A day earlier, the US renamed its Pacific Command the Indo-Pacific Command, underscoring its strategic drive to militarily encircle China. Admiral Harry Harris, the outgoing head of the command, labelled China the US's "biggest long-term challenge" in the region. "Without focused involvement and engagement by the United

States and our allies and partners, China will realise its dream of hegemony in Asia,” he said.

Harris is about to become the US ambassador to South Korea, bringing to bear his long record of pushing for US and allied military action to combat Beijing’s influence.

While these threats were being uttered, the Trump administration stepped up its economic ultimatum to China. US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross left Beijing on Sunday with no word of a breakthrough that could avert a trade war.

Just days before Ross’s arrival in Beijing, Trump set a June 15 deadline for naming \$US50 billion of Chinese products to be hit with a 25 percent tariff. After the Ross visit, China warned that any deal would be off if Trump carried out his threat to impose punitive tariffs on Chinese technology (see: “Deep divisions over US trade policies at G7 finance ministers meeting”).

In Singapore, Mattis dismissed expectations of any immediate outcome from a Trump-Kim summit. “We can anticipate, at best, a bumpy road to the negotiation,” he said. He ruled out reducing US troops in the region as part of a deal, saying the issue is “not on the table, June 12 ... nor should it be.”

Mattis’s comments appeared to cut across earlier statements by Trump. Following the president’s much-promoted White House event with senior North Korean official Kim Yong-chol last week, Trump said he wanted to avoid talk of maintaining “maximum pressure” on Pyongyang, because relations were improving.

Trump’s modified stance came under criticism in sections of the US media, including the *New York Times*, for appearing to soften his previous threats to annihilate the North unless it totally dismantled its nuclear and missile programs. It also provoked concerns in Tokyo.

Last Friday, the US president then played down the prospect of any early agreement with Kim, the summit was just “a ‘getting to know you’ meeting.”

In Singapore, Mattis reasserted Washington’s determination to retain its military presence in South Korea and Japan—the US has military bases and thousands of troops in both countries. Directly addressing the defence ministers of Japan and South Korea, Mattis said: “I affirm America’s ironclad, unwavering security commitment to your people and our mutual security interests.”

At the Singapore forum, Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera opposed any suggestion of relaxing the crippling sanctions on North Korea. “In light of how North Korea has behaved in the past, I believe it is

important not to reward North Korea solely for agreeing to have a dialogue,” he said.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government has raised objections that any US deal could involve Pyongyang agreeing to give up its long-range missiles in return for sanctions relief, while keeping its short-range arsenal, leaving Japan and South Korea within range.

Abe’s government has exploited the alleged threat of a North Korean attack to help justify its push for the remilitarisation of Japan, including the abolition of the so-called pacifist clause inserted in the country’s constitution after its defeat by the US in World War II.

Trump’s entreaties to Kim are seeking to transform the North into a US-aligned cheap labour platform on the borders of both China and Russia after serving as a buffer state for both countries since the end of the 1950–53 Korean War.

Far from reducing the great power tensions surrounding Korea, which sits at the vortex between Japan, China and Russia, the prospect of a US deal that could tilt North Korea into Washington’s camp has intensified the geo-strategic jostling.

Trump said he “did not like” last week’s meeting between Kim and Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who invited Kim to Moscow for a summit with President Vladimir Putin. Kim accepted the offer and reportedly complained about attempts at “US hegemony” in the region.

Beijing’s alarm at any rapprochement between the US and the North Korean regime also led to Kim holding talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping in the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian in May, their second meeting in as many months. Trump then accused China of exerting a negative influence on Kim, highlighting the intensifying struggle for great power dominance.

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