

US renews insults and threats against North Korea

By Peter Symonds
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The US administration is stepping up the pressure on North Korea as the end-of-year deadline set by Pyongyang for productive talks is looming. The breakdown of negotiations that began in June 2018, with a summit in Singapore between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, could lead to a rapid escalation of hostilities.

The US called a meeting of the UN Security Council yesterday and foreshadowed “a comprehensive update on recent developments on the Korean Peninsula, including recent missile launches and the possibility of an escalatory DPRK [North Korea] provocation.”

US ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, told the session that North Korea’s missile tests had been “deeply counterproductive” and risked closing the door on prospects for negotiating peace. She called on Pyongyang to stop “further hostility and threats” and to engage with Washington, then declared that, if not the UN Security Council had to be “prepared to act accordingly.”

Craft’s comments are a warning that the US is preparing to end any negotiations if North Korea resumes nuclear testing or fires a long-range ballistic missile after the end of the year, and once again threaten Pyongyang with war. The US ambassador made clear that Washington will take no notice of North Korea’s deadline, saying: “Let me be clear: The United States and the Security Council have a goal—not a deadline.”

While talks have proceeded, the US has maintained crippling economic sanctions on North Korea, both its own unilateral measures and those imposed through the UN Security Council. The sanctions regime has affected most North Korean exports, including coal and other minerals, and many of its imports, including oil and petroleum products. For its part, the US has done

nothing other than suspend large scale joint military exercises with its ally, South Korea.

Confronting mounting economic problems, it is hardly surprising that North Korea set a deadline in April for meaningful negotiations, after a second Trump-Kim summit in Vietnam broke down the same month. Since May, North Korea has carried out 13 missile tests—all short-range—which Washington has largely ignored.

Yesterday, Ambassador Craft declared that the US was willing to keep talking and was “flexible” in its approach. “We remain ready to take actions in parallel, and to simultaneously take concrete steps towards this agreement,” she said.

That is simply a lie. The talks in Vietnam floundered precisely because the Trump administration has insisted that the Pyongyang regime dismantle its nuclear facilities and programs, along with its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, before the US begins the process of ending sanctions against North Korea.

Moreover, the US has offered North Korea no security guarantees in return for denuclearization. Washington rebuffed Pyongyang’s offer to begin talks towards a peace treaty to formally end the 1950–1953 Korean War. Hostilities in the bloody US-led conflict which devastated the Korean Peninsula ended with an armistice, but the countries involved remain at war. The US and North Korean leaders met in June for a day in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas, but no agreement emerged about future talks.

As the North Korean deadline approaches, the war of words between Washington and Pyongyang has intensified. In recent weeks, Mr. Trump has revived his insults of the North Korean leader. Speaking in London last week, he again branded Kim as “rocket man” and implied that the US would resort to military force if

North Korea did not denuclearise. Trump boasted that the US had “the most powerful military we’ve ever had... and, hopefully, we don’t have to use it, but if we do, we’ll use it.”

Last Thursday, North Korea’s first vice foreign minister, Choe Son-hui, responded to the insult by saying it was a sign of “the relapse of the dotage of a dotard” on the part of Trump. Pyongyang has also announced that it conducted “a very important test” at its satellite launching ground last Friday, sparking speculation that it was testing rocket engines for its intercontinental ballistic missiles.

North Korea officials have also been hinting that the US might receive an unwelcome “Christmas gift.” On Saturday, the North Korean ambassador to the UN, Kim Song, issued a statement suggesting that denuclearisation was off the table and no longer negotiable.

The only concession to Pyongyang was the Trump administration’s decision not to support a discussion earlier this week in the UN Security Council on North Korea’s human rights abuses. As a result, the call for a meeting by European powers fell short of the minimum number of votes needed and so it did not take place.

The US decision was not only criticized by human rights organisations, but by Trump’s former national security adviser, John Bolton, a hardline militarist who has urged military strikes on North Korea in the past. It also once again demonstrates that the US, among other imperialist powers, cynically exploits “human rights issues”—turning them on or off to suit its national interests.

With less than three weeks before the end of the year, Washington’s refusal to make any significant concessions to North Korea is setting the stage for a dangerous confrontation. In 2017, Trump recklessly heightened tensions with North Korea, declaring in the United Nations that he would “totally destroy” the country before doing an abrupt about face and holding a summit with Kim.

Just how close the world was to a catastrophic war is underlined by a recently published book *Trump and His Generals: The Cost of Chaos*, in which security analyst Peter Bergen reveals that Trump had demanded that the families of US service members in South Korea be evacuated. Such a move, which his generals advised against and apparently ignored, would have been

interpreted in Pyongyang as the preparations for imminent military strikes on North Korea.

Any US conflict with North Korea could rapidly escalate into an all-out war on the Korean Peninsula and drag in other powers, especially China. Trump’s negotiations with Kim have never been primarily about North Korea’s tiny nuclear arsenal that poses no significant threat to the US. Rather it has been an attempt to bully and bribe North Korea to shift away from Beijing as part of the far broader US military build-up under Obama and Trump for a catastrophic conflict with China.

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