

Trump, North Korea and the Danger of World War

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The North Korean nuclear test yesterday, its sixth and most powerful, has once again exposed the extremely volatile and precarious state of global geopolitics and the great danger of a descent into a nuclear world war.

The unstable regime in Pyongyang has concluded that its only hope of self-preservation, in the face of provocative threats from an unstable Trump administration, is to try and expand its nuclear arsenal as quickly as possible. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is acutely conscious of the brutal end of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, after they abandoned their so-called weapons of mass destruction.

While the actions of North Korea are certainly compounding the risk of conflict, prime responsibility for pushing the world to the brink of nuclear war rests with US imperialism. Moreover, as the reckless and belligerent statements from Trump and his officials demonstrate, North Korea's limited nuclear weaponry and reactionary nationalist bombast will not prevent the US from using its military might, including its huge nuclear arsenal, against the North Korean people.

After a meeting between Trump and his top military and national security advisers, US Defence Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis warned North Korea that it faced "a massive military response" to any threat to the US or its allies.

"We are not looking to the total annihilation of a country, namely North Korea," Mattis continued, "but as I said, we have many options to do so." President Trump "wanted to be briefed on each one of them," he added.

Trump himself warned of a US nuclear attack against North Korea when he declared last month that it confronted "fire and fury like the world has never seen." A White House readout from his phone call yesterday with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe explicitly declared that the US stood ready to use "the full range of diplomatic, conventional and nuclear capabilities at our disposal."

Trump was asked on Sunday:

"Will you attack North Korea?"

He refused to rule out pre-emptive military strikes, simply declaring:

“We’ll see.”

The US president has repeatedly said that he would not signal a military attack in advance, compounding the uncertainty, and hence fears in Pyongyang. Furthermore, as the crisis on the Korean Peninsula has escalated, the divisions in the Trump administration have resulted in an incoherent policy, which swings wildly between threats of all-out war and suggestions of talks, further inflaming the already explosive situation.

In the aftermath of yesterday’s nuclear test, the White House, along with the American media, has turned its fire on China and Russia, underscoring the fact that the US confrontation with North Korea is bound up with far broader strategic aims. American strategists regard domination of the vast Eurasian land mass as the key to US global hegemony and China as the chief obstacle to that goal.

NBC presenters Andrea Mitchell and Chuck Todd on yesterday’s “Meet the Press,” repeatedly emphasised the accusation that China and Russia were providing “economic help” to North Korea. Republican Senator Roy Blunt added:

“There’s some sense that they have been more helpful than they should have been and more sustaining to the economy than they should have been.”

Last month, both China and Russia voted for, and have begun implementing, crippling UN sanctions on North Korea that will slash its exports by one third. What is now being actively discussed in Washington is a total economic embargo—itself an act of war—and the cutting of trade with those who continue to conduct any with North Korea—above all China and Russia.

Trump, who is already preparing trade war measures against China over its alleged “theft” of intellectual property, tweeted yesterday:

“The United States is considering, in addition to other options, stopping all trade with any country doing business with North Korea.”

Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin confirmed on Fox News Sunday that he was preparing “a sanctions package to send to the president, for his strong consideration” to do just that.

The implications for the global economy are immense—a collapse of trade, plunging the world into economic depression, as in the 1930s. That such a possibility is being actively considered is a measure of the depth of the economic and geo-political tensions wracking the world. Moreover, the threat of all-out trade war between the world’s two largest economies is being accompanied by the preparations for all-out military conflict.

The Trump administration has accelerated the diplomatic, economic and military challenge to China begun by President Obama under his “pivot to Asia.” The massive US military build-up in North East Asia, including the installation of anti-ballistic missile systems and huge and highly provocative joint US-South Korean war games, is directed more at fighting a nuclear war with China than a conflict with the small, backward country of North Korea.

As well as ramping up the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, the Trump administration has given the green light for more “freedom of navigation” operations in another of the region’s volatile flashpoints—the South China Sea. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Friday that the US Pacific Command is preparing to sail warships and send military aircraft directly into waters and airspace claimed by China around its islets, two or three times in the next few months as part of a regular schedule.

In Europe, the US is escalating its confrontation with Russia by taking the first steps towards annulling the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with the former Soviet Union. As Germany’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warned, the danger is “that the US will construct new missiles and station them in Europe,” raising the terrifying spectre of a nuclear war in Europe between the two countries—the US and Russia—that both possess thousands of nuclear warheads.

The most dangerous factor in this highly volatile situation is the profound economic, social and political crisis of US imperialism—of which Trump is the most malignant expression. His administration confronts deep internal divisions and a huge and mounting social crisis, which is generating massive domestic opposition, as a result of its incompetence and indifference to the human suffering caused by the Houston flooding. The danger is that Trump will resort to a war against North Korea with incalculable consequences, as a means of directing acute domestic class tensions outwards against an external foe.

At the same time, these social tensions, in America and around the world, are fueling the coming revolutionary upheavals of the working class. The crucial issue is the building of a revolutionary leadership, to forge a unified international movement of workers guided by a scientific socialist program and perspective to put an end to the capitalist system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states. That is the perspective for which the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections fight.

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