

The Threat of another Korean War

Dave Stockton Sat, 12/08/2017 - 19:48

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US President Donald Trump, so far a spectacular failure in his domestic policies, is compensating for this by exercising his power as the Commander in Chief of the most powerful nation in the world. Having launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian airbase and killed 39 ISIS fighters with the 'Mother Of All Bombs' in Afghanistan in April, he is now threatening North Korea with a devastating war, conventional or even nuclear.

'North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States,' he warned. 'They will be met with fire, fury and, frankly, power, the likes of which this world has never seen before.' He later tweeted:

'My first order as president was to renovate and modernise our nuclear arsenal. It is now far stronger and more powerful than ever before. Hopefully we will never have to use this power, but there will never be a time that we are not the most powerful nation in the world!'

Note that last sentence, it is aimed not just at Pyongyang but at Beijing, Moscow and even Berlin. Here, Trump is speaking for the whole US ruling class. What he is saying in effect is, 'Even if you can eventually catch up with us economically, or even overtake us, don't think that we will ever let you challenge our absolute military hegemony over the globe.' Behind this assertion lies the recognition that, if it ever did happen, the US could expect to be despoiled and humiliated, just as it despoiled and humiliated the old imperialist powers itself after 1945.

America's repeated threats have as much, or more, to do with its developing strategic rivalry with China as with preventing North Korea from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Under Trump, as under Obama, the US is busy constructing a protection racket over the smaller states of East and South East Asia, such as it has operated since 1949 in Europe, where it's called Nato.

The US Defense Secretary, James Mattis, who had previously warned North Korea that it faced the 'end of its regime and the destruction of its people' if it attacked Washington or its allies, has gone on to say that US policy is led by a diplomatic effort, under Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, which "has diplomatic traction" and is gaining "diplomatic results". Mattis, nickname 'Mad Dog', is plainly not the maddest pooch in the White House kennels.

Whatever differences there may be over the rhetoric, this is a continuation of the 'cosh and carrot' approach to diplomacy that characterises the new period of inter-imperialist rivalry, which opened under Bush and Obama.

Pyongyang can threaten, too

Unsurprisingly, North Korea responded with its own colourful threats. General Kim Rak Gyom, the head of the Korean People's Army, responded that his country would, in the next few days, complete plans to launch four Hwasong-12 rockets, intermediate-range missiles, that would fly over Japan and then land in

the sea around Guam, 'enveloping' the island. Guam is an unincorporated US territory, effectively a colony, seized from Spain in the war of 1898. It is home to the Andersen Air Force base, the Naval Base for the US Seventh and Pacific Fleets and various other military assets which, together, occupy 29 percent of the island.

At the same time, the Washington Post has conveniently reported that 'a previously secret Defence Intelligence Agency analysis' claims that Pyongyang has produced 'a miniaturised warhead that can fit inside one of the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) that it has been testing'. Were this to be true, it would cross one of Trump's 'red lines' which, in his mind at least, would justify an attack on North Korea.

Thus, the threats and counter threats of the leaders do contain the very real potential of getting out of hand and producing a disaster. The peoples of North and South Korea, indeed of the world, have good cause to be anxious that the bombast and subsequent need for face-saving by Trump and Kim could drive either to put the other to the ultimate test.

Kim Jong-un, like his father and grandfather, is presented in the Western media as a tin pot tyrant, whose pursuit of nuclear weaponry is evidence of megalomania. It is certainly true that the regime is a brutal dictatorship, but it is hardly alone in the world on that count. Far from being evidence of insanity, the development of a nuclear bomb is a rational response to decades of US hostility. For the regime, such a weapon, and the means to deliver it, offers the only guarantee of survival.

Pyongyang's official news outlet spelt out the logic last year; 'History proves that powerful nuclear deterrence serves as the strongest treasured sword for frustrating outsiders' aggression. The Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and the Gaddafi regime in Libya could not escape the fate of destruction after being deprived of their foundations for nuclear development and giving up nuclear programs of their own accord.'

That Kim and his regime intend to press ahead with acquiring the 'ultimate deterrent' is, therefore, not in doubt. Once they have 'the bomb', they perhaps calculate that, as with Israel, Pakistan and India, the imperialist powers on all sides will then accept a fait accompli and negotiate some kind of 'detente' that will allow a de-escalation and a transfer of scarce resources to economic development. It is the rapidity of the progress they have made in recent years that explains the increased emphasis that the US, even before Trump, has placed on demanding an end to such 'provocation'.

Clearly, the escalating rhetoric of both Washington and Pyongyang can be seen as largely a matter of bluff 'even the eye-catching reference to missiles launched at Guam is actually very carefully worded; dependent on what 'around Guam' means, it is not literally a threat to attack US territory. Equally, Trump and his advisors know that at the first sign of a US attack, South Korea's capital, Seoul, would come under immediate artillery and missile bombardment and that China would no doubt mobilise its own forces. Nonetheless, military confrontations can develop a dynamic of their own and if Trump and his generals think their bluff has been called, their threats could turn into actions, with hardly calculable results.

Whatever the confusion surrounding the positions of Pyongyang and Washington, their confrontation has made one thing very clear; the pivotal role of China. Having been North Korea's principal, sometimes only, ally for decades, Beijing's decision to support the recent UN Security Council imposition of sanctions on the country came as a surprise to many. It was followed by Xi Jinping's statement, after a telephone conversation with Trump, that 'China and the US have a common interest in realising the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula'.

In effect, this is a recognition of a problem with which Washington should be familiar, the client state that decides to pursue its own interests rather than those of its master. This, and the limits to China's patience,

had already been outlined by an editorial in Global Times, which declared, "China should also make clear that if North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral. If the US and South Korea carry out strikes and try to overthrow the North Korean regime and change the political pattern of the Korean Peninsula, China will prevent them from doing so."

Assuming that Beijing knows that North Korea will not attack "US soil" and that South Korea will certainly not attack the North, this is primarily a warning to the US and, once again, the sting is in the tail. That China might now be in a position to "prevent them doing so" was one of the implications of an unprecedented show of force to mark the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army on August 1.

No such anniversary has ever been celebrated before and, unlike the traditional parades on May Day, this was not held in Beijing but at the Zhurihe Combined Tactics Training Base in Inner Mongolia with the troops in combat fatigues, not ceremonial uniform. The parade also displayed China's latest weaponry, including its J-20 stealth fighter jet and DF-31AG advanced long-range missiles. Much of this weaponry had never been seen in public before.

Whether the PLA is actually capable of preventing a US attack has to be questionable, despite the hardware. This is an army that has not actually fought anybody for decades and the last time it did, against Vietnam in the mid 70s, it got a bloody nose. However, the real import of China's position is the objective of denuclearisation, which would mean a dismantling of what North Korea has already achieved. What remains unclear is whether Beijing has already decided that this will require a regime change of its own making. Support for UN sanctions, which do not, yet, include energy or food supplies, is, nonetheless, a warning that Kim and his circle will know how to interpret.

If that is Beijing's long term policy, then the implied trade-off for removing the "nuclear threat" would be US acceptance that the Korean peninsula is now within China's sphere of influence. That, however, is what all US administrations have been trying to prevent. For them, the over-arching strategic objective is that Korea, all of Korea, should be an integral part of a military alliance to prevent Chinese expansion.

It is this underlying confrontation between the US and China that is the driving force behind the "Korean crisis" and makes it the precursor of future conflicts that will shape the rest of the century. Here and now, socialists and workers and youth movements in general need to protest on the streets against the threatened attack on North Korea. A defeat and humiliation for Trump would be a victory for the forces of protest all round the world, not least in the United States itself.

This does not mean that we give any political support to Kim Jong-un and his regime, but the US intervention is not designed to bring about democracy, nor will it bring peace and stability to the peoples of the region. Quite the opposite. For all these reasons, we work for the defeat of all US interventions both during their planning and during execution. At the same time, we need to support the militant trade union and youth movements in South Korea, which have repeatedly opposed the bellicose threats of their own right wing governments and the USA.

Hands off North Korea - all US troops, including the Seventh Fleet and all airbases, out of Korea and the whole region!

The Antiwar Movement around the world must mobilise mass action on the streets against all threats to Korea!

Down with the anti-working class warmonger Trump and his reactionary administration.

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