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US threats against North Korea and the danger of war in Asia

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With extreme recklessness, the Trump administration is charting a course toward war in the Asia-Pacific. From the response in the US media and political establishment, however, one would have no idea how dangerous the situation is, nor how incalculable the consequences.

The latest in the escalating war of words came from US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who said at a press conference in Seoul, South Korea on Friday that “all options are on the table” in dealing with North Korea. The comments came in advance of Tillerson’s visit today to China, North Korea’s main ally.

“Let me be very clear: the policy of strategic patience has ended,” the former CEO of ExxonMobil said, in what was widely interpreted as a rebuke to the Obama administration’s preference for economic sanctions in relation to North Korea. When asked about the possibility of a military response, Tillerson replied, “If they elevate the threat of their weapons program to a level that we believe requires action then that option is on the table.”

Echoing Tillerson’s threats, US President Donald Trump tweeted, “North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been ‘playing’ the United States for years. China has done little to help!”

If words have any meaning, the statements from Tillerson and Trump make clear that the US is preparing “pre-emptive” war, justified by North Korea’s reported plans to test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the continental United States.

There is a staggering disconnect between the terrible consequences of such a war and the way it is being treated in the US media. Tillerson’s comments were greeted with a shrug on the network news programs Saturday evening. The Democrats have remained silent.

What would come from a US strike on North Korea? Would the crisis-ridden North Korean regime respond by firing missiles against Seoul or Tokyo? Would it use one of its nuclear weapons? Would a war against North Korea spiral into a direct conflict between the world’s two largest economies, the United States and China? These questions cannot be answered for certain, but all scenarios are possible.

One of the few comments addressing the character of a US war with North Korea came from retired Army Major Mike Lyons, a senior fellow for the Truman National Security Project. Writing in the *Hill* on Friday, Lyons said that US allies in the Pacific should begin “taking inventory of your military capability” and planning for a military operation that “could cause immediate casualties and destruction the world hasn’t seen since WWII.”

“We would have to literally blanket the sky for hours with air strikes,” Lyons wrote. The attack “would not focus on just military targets—there would be civilian casualties in the hundreds of thousands as well.” He further warned, “The war won’t go as planned for many reasons—if the North is successful in launching a nuclear weapon that destroys part of Seoul,” the US would likely be impelled to retaliate.

In other words, a war is being contemplated that could lead to the first combat use of nuclear weapons since the end of World War II.

Any military action in the tinder box of North East Asia can have far-reaching consequences, whatever the immediate intentions of the US may be. In recent weeks, the US and South Korea have engaged in large-scale military exercises; North Korea’s ambassador to the UN has warned that the “the Korean Peninsula is again inching to the brink of a nuclear war;” North Korea has test-fired missiles in the direction of Japan; and the US has begun deployment of an anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea that is directed primarily at China.

On Tuesday, Japan announced plans to dispatch its largest warship on a tour of the South China Sea, prompting protests from China.

The German newspaper *Die Zeit* commented earlier this week on escalating geopolitical tensions throughout the world: “Whether on purpose or accidentally, Trump could quickly get into a great war. Whether the United States, or anyone else, could emerge victorious from it, is doubtful.”

The recklessness of US actions testifies to the fact that the root of the spiraling conflict is not to be found in the Asia-Pacific, but rather in the United States, which is facing an unparalleled series of crises.

Despite its increasingly provocative threats against China and North Korea, the US alliance system in Asia is showing severe signs of strain. The impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye was seen as a blow to US interests in the region. Meanwhile the Philippines, a key US ally, has reoriented toward China at the expense of the US.

Washington's European alliance system faces an even more dramatic breakdown. The same day that Tillerson made his threats against China, Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a press conference in which the NATO allies addressed each other effectively as adversaries.

At the same time, the Trump administration has proposed a budget that calls for cuts to domestic spending of over 30 percent in some departments, while adding some \$52 billion to US military spending. The White House is pushing a health care overhaul that would gut Medicaid, the health care program for the poor and disabled, and cause more than 20 million people to lose health care coverage.

The imposition of these policies will lead to growing social discontent within the United States, which is already beset by record social inequality.

There is an element of madness in the Trump administration's policies, but it is a madness rooted in the contradictions of American capitalism. The American ruling class depends upon constant war—both as a means of diverting social tensions outward, and as the principle mechanism for maintaining its global position under conditions of economic decline.

Responsibility for this policy does not end with the White House. Whatever their differences, all factions of the political establishment are agreed on the basic strategic imperative of world domination. As for the pseudo-left organizations, which take their line from the Democratic Party and ooze with the complacency of the upper-middle class layers for which they speak, one would never know from reading their publications that world war is an imminent possibility.

The greatest danger is that the working class, which does not want war, is unaware of the gravity of the situation and is not politically organized and mobilized to prevent it. Policies that will have catastrophic consequences for workers in the United States and internationally are being carried out behind their backs. This plays into the hands of the conspiratorial cabal in Washington.

The development of a socialist, anti-war movement in the United States and throughout the world is the most urgent political task.