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China warns US strategic bomber in East China Sea

By Peter Symonds

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In another sign of continuing high regional tensions, the Chinese military issued a warning on Wednesday to a US strategic B-1B bomber flying over the East China Sea. The bomber was one of two B-1Bs deployed from Guam to take part in massive joint military exercises—Foal Eagle and Key Resolve—underway in South Korea.

US Pacific Air Forces spokesman Major Phil Ventura told CNN the bomber entered an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) proclaimed by Beijing in 2013 but not recognised by the US and its allies. Ventura claimed that Chinese officials told the B-1 pilots the plane was operating illegally in Chinese airspace and ordered it to leave. The pilots responded by saying they were conducting routine operations in international airspace and did not deviate.

While described as “routine” by US officials, the presence of an American strategic bomber off the Chinese mainland is an obvious cause for concern to the Chinese military. According to CNN, the aircraft was flying about 130 kilometres southwest of South Korea’s Jeju Island, which is approximately 500 kilometres from Shanghai.

The B1-B was designed as a nuclear strategic bomber but, as of 1995, is no longer equipped to carry nuclear weapons, according to the US military. It is, however, a long-range, super-sonic bomber capable of carrying a huge payload of 34 tonnes of bombs, precision-guided munitions,

missiles or naval mines. The B1-B is an integral component of the Pentagon's AirSea Battle strategy for war with China that envisages massive air and missile attacks on Chinese military and communications.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that two B1-Bs flew in formation with South Korean fighter jets and took part in simulated bombing missions at the Kunsan Air Base. A South Korean official told the media the deployment was of "great significance" and the joint operations "improved interoperability of US-South Korean fighting power." The bomber also participated in joint training with the Japanese air force.

The deployment took place amid a tense standoff on the Korean Peninsula as more than 320,000 South Korea and American military personnel continued two months of war games that are a thinly-disguised rehearsal for conflict with North Korea. Since 2015, US and South Korean forces have adopted a new strategy for fighting war against North Korea, known as OPLAN 5015. It includes "pre-emptive" attacks on the north's nuclear, military and industrial facilities and "decapitation raids" to kill its leadership.

Newsweek reported that US and South Korean soldiers this week staged a two-day exercise to simulate an attack on a North Korean chemical weapons laboratory. The "Warrior Strike 6" drill involved the insertion of infantry and armoured units via Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters to storm an imitation village.

The Foal Eagle war games also involve the US aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, and other naval warships. The anti-ballistic missile destroyer, the USS Stethem, arrived in South Korea last week and today is due to become the first American warship to dock in South Korea's newly-constructed civilian-military complex on Jeju Island. While built by South Korea, the complex is part of the Pentagon's restructuring of its basing arrangements in Asia in preparation for war with China.

The annual joint military exercises have always provoked opposition from North Korea, which has responded this year with a series of ballistic missile tests. The Trump administration, which is currently engaged in a review of US strategy toward North Korea, has seized on the missile launches to justify the US military build-up in Asia, including the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea, and to make menacing threats toward Pyongyang.

During his trip to Asia last week, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared in South Korea that "all options" were on the table to counter North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. The American media has reported that pre-emptive military strikes on North Korea, as well as "regime-change," were among the options being considered. While in Beijing, Tillerson undoubtedly used these threats to try to bully the Chinese government into taking tougher measures against North Korea, its neighbour and ally.

US and South Korean officials are speculating that North Korea could be on the brink of a sixth nuclear test. Two unnamed US officials told CNN yesterday that "specific intelligence indicators" based on satellite imagery show Pyongyang is ready to carry out another test at its

Punggye-ri underground test site. Weeks of extensive surface activity, involving vehicles, personnel and equipment, have stopped.

The North Korean nuclear program, which has been accompanied by spine-chilling threats against the US and its allies, will do nothing to defend the North Korean people. Instead, it sows divisions in the international working class. Another nuclear test would play straight into the hands of the Trump administration and feed the clamour in Washington for reckless and provocative US action against Pyongyang.

Last week, Tillerson said Trump would not continue the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience"—that is, the imposition of tougher and tougher sanctions, accompanied by a refusal to talk to Pyongyang unless it ended its nuclear and missile programs. The US secretary of state also ruled out negotiations with North Korea, leading to the conclusion that Trump and his cabinet of generals, billionaires and fascists are contemplating actions that could lead to war on the Korean peninsula.

The death toll in Korean War between 1950 and 1953 was in the millions. One estimate put the number of soldiers and civilians killed or missing for South Korea at 1.2 million and for North Korea at 1.1 million. In addition, China suffered 600,000 soldiers killed or missing and the United States 36,000.

The Pentagon is now preparing for a war, with far more devastating weapons, that would likely draw in other major powers. CNN reported: "Privately, US commanders have said any pre-emptive strikes by the US would likely result in a North Korean attack on Seoul, leading to disastrous consequences." Yet that is exactly what US and South Korean forces are currently rehearsing for—including with the deployment of B1-B bombers.