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US sends B-1 strategic bombers over South Korea

By Peter Symonds

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The US Air Force sent two B-1B Lancer strategic bombers from Guam to the Korean Peninsula on Monday to engage in bilateral training exercises with South Korean and Japanese military forces. The provocative move was taken amid continuing threats by the Trump administration to launch military action against North Korea.

A US Air Force spokesperson claimed that the flight was routine and refused to say whether the bombers were armed or how close they flew to the border with North Korea. B-1B bombers are no longer fitted to carry nuclear weapons, but can carry a massive conventional payload—23 tonnes externally and 34 tonnes internally—of cruise missiles, smart bombs and other munitions.

While denouncing North Korean ballistic missile tests, the Pentagon has been test-launching its own Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). Last week the highly sophisticated missile was launched from a base in California and splashed down in the Pacific over 6,000 kilometres away. Another test is due to take place today. One Minuteman III missile is capable of carrying multiple nuclear weapons that can be independently directed at separate targets.

The drills involving B-1B bombers were conducted as the aircraft carrier strike group headed by the USS Carl Vinson participated in war games with South Korean and Japanese naval vessels in

waters off the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean and US militaries have just completed two months of annual joint exercises involving up to 320,000 personnel in rehearsals for fighting a war with North Korea.

These menacing military manoeuvres appear to be at odds with President Donald Trump's comment on Monday that he would be "honoured" to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un "under the right circumstances." In reality, the threat of war is an integral part of the immense pressure being applied to North Korea to buckle to US demands that it abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Only under such circumstances would Trump talk with Kim.

Following the B-1B flights, the North Korean regime reacted with warnings of its own. The official KCNA news agency declared on Tuesday: "The reckless military provocation is pushing the situation on the Korean Peninsula closer to the brink of nuclear war."

A North Korean foreign ministry statement added that because of the US push for sanctions and pressure, Pyongyang "will speed up at the maximum pace the measure for bolstering its nuclear deterrence." Far from defending the North Korean people, Pyongyang's limited nuclear arsenal simply provides a pretext for Washington and its allies to continue their military expansion in the region.

The latest North Korean ballistic missile test on Saturday was a failure—the second in a row. According to the *New York Times*, the Trump administration has continued a program of cyber sabotage initiated under President Barack Obama that could be responsible for the high percentage of North Korean missile malfunctions.

The US military build-up in North East Asia is directed at China as well as North Korea. Trump, while pressuring Beijing to rein in Pyongyang, has continued the confrontational "pivot to Asia" of the previous Obama administration, threatening trade war measures against China as well as military action to isolate Chinese islets in the South China Sea.

The Pentagon has accelerated the installation of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic battery in South Korea that has provoked opposition and protests. US officials told the media on Monday that the THAAD installation had achieved an initial operational capacity even though it would not be fully operational for months.

In a press briefing yesterday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang called for a halt to the installation. "China's position is clear-cut and firm. We oppose the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea and urge relevant sides to immediately stop the deployment."

Beijing fears that the powerful X-band radar associated with the THAAD system will be used to peer deep inside Chinese territory. Linked to broader US anti-missile systems, it would give more advanced warning of missile launches in the event of a war and thus heighten the ability of the US and its allies to shoot missiles down.

The Chinese spokesperson restated Beijing's call for "dialogue and consultation to resolve the peninsula's nuclear issue," saying it was "the only realistic, feasible means to achieve

denuclearisation.” Without specifying what actions China would take, he warned: “We will resolutely take necessary measures to defend our interests.”

The THAAD system’s installation has compounded the political crisis in South Korea following the impeachment and removal of Park Geun-hye as president. With presidential elections due on May 9, leading contender Democrat Moon Jae-in has postured as an opponent of the THAAD installation to capitalise on growing public opposition, while reassuring Washington of his support for the US alliance.

Significantly, less than a week from the election, CIA director Mike Pompeo arrived in the South Korean capital on Monday for talks with American embassy and military officials. An embassy spokesman said Pompeo had no meetings scheduled with South Korean officials but did not rule out such talks or meetings with presidential candidates.

The Trump administration is not going to tolerate any vacillation by a new administration in South Korea—one of Washington’s key allies in Asia and home to US bases and 28,500 military personnel. Trump will be just as ruthless in moving against political leaders as Obama, whose administration conspired for the removal of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in 2010 for cutting across his “pivot to Asia.”

The dispatch of US strategic bombers to the Korean Peninsula is just the latest ploy in a reckless game of brinkmanship that threatens to trigger a catastrophic conflict that could draw in nuclear-armed powers such as China and Russia. Having created extreme tensions, any incident—either deliberate or accidental—could set off the powder keg.