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## The world on the brink

12 August 2017

The world is daily and hourly edging closer to the brink of nuclear war, as US President Donald Trump maintains a constant stream of extraordinarily inflammatory and reckless threats against North Korea. Such bellicose language coming from the man in charge of the most powerful military force on the planet is generating increasing shock and fear that war with nuclear weapons could break out at any moment.

Having tweeted yesterday morning that the military option is now “locked and loaded should North Korea act unwisely,” Trump followed up with images of B-1 strategic bombers and a message from US Pacific Command that these warplanes were ready to fulfill their “Fight Tonight” mission in Korea.

Just hours later, Trump rebuked German Chancellor Angela Merkel for criticising the “escalation of rhetoric,” declaring, “I hope they understand the gravity of the situation of what I said, and what I said is what I mean.” The US president again menaced North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, warning that if he utters one more overt threat, “he will truly regret it.”

With the danger of war looming with ever greater menace over the world’s population, it is natural to think, or at least hope, that what is involved is just a war of words, and that somehow a means will be found to pull back from the precipice. It is necessary, however, to look reality in the face.

Comparisons are being made to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962—the closest the world has come to nuclear war. But that tense and precarious confrontation was finally resolved and nuclear arsenals stood down because neither the American nor the Russian leader wanted to unleash a nuclear exchange.

The same cannot be said today. At least one side, the Trump administration, is primed and prepared to engulf the other side in “fire and fury like the world has never seen.” Moreover, whether intentionally or not, Trump is recklessly goading North Korea into making a desperate military move.

Trump has said absolutely nothing to reassure North Korean leader Kim that the US wants a negotiated settlement or anything short of complete and abject capitulation. And as the prospect of conflict increasingly seems inevitable, military logic increasingly takes over. If the highly unstable Pyongyang regime believes that a massive US attack is imminent, it could decide to launch its own pre-emptive strike rather than have its capacity to retaliate completely destroyed.

In its recklessness, the Trump administration is proceeding with indifference and disregard for what would be unleashed by a war against North Korea. Unlike the Korean War of 1950–53, which cost the lives of millions on both sides of north-south border, a new conflict would be unlikely to be confined to the Korean Peninsula.

The threat of nuclear war is not simply the product of a fascistic madman in the White House, but arises out of immense geo-political tensions fueled by the deep economic crisis of American and global capitalism. Trump has the backing of powerful sections of the military and political elites in Washington who have been pressing for the US to challenge and if necessary go to war with China, regarded as the chief obstacle to American global dominance.

The present crisis is the outcome of the political climate prepared by a quarter-century of continuous wars by US imperialism in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, as Washington sought to use its military might to overcome its historic economic decline. It has become a virtual article of faith in American ruling circles that all of their problems on the international arena can be resolved through military action.

The ground was prepared for war against North Korea by the Obama administration, which, as part of its “pivot to Asia” against China, authorised a huge military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific. The US military has now stationed its most advanced weaponry in Asia, along with 60 percent of its air and naval forces, and secured new basing agreements throughout the region.

The Pentagon could immediately call on more than 28,000 Air Force, naval, Marine and Special Operations personnel based in South Korea as well as many more forces from its bases in Japan and Guam. Moreover, in the event of a war with North Korea, the US would assume operational control of the South Korean military, with its 625,000 personnel and 3,100,000 reservists.

Any war on the Korean Peninsula poses great dangers not only for China, but also for Russia, as both countries share borders with North Korea. The criminal irresponsibility of the Trump

administration is underscored by the fact that it is prepared to initiate a war in what has been a dangerous flashpoint throughout the past century.

It cannot be assumed that China or Russia will simply sit by while the US starts a firestorm in their backyard that will grossly undermine their own security. Having just voted in the UN Security Council for harsh new sanctions on North Korea, Beijing and Moscow can only regard Trump's warmongering this week as a betrayal.

China intervened in the first Korean War as American troops approached its border, and it could do so again. An editorial in the state-owned *Global Times*, reflecting the more militarist sections of the Chinese regime, insisted that Beijing had to "respond with a firm hand" to defend its interests. While urging that China remain neutral if North Korea launches a first strike, it warned: "If the US and South Korea carry out strikes and try to overthrow the North Korean regime... China will prevent them from doing so."

It cannot be ruled out that a way will be devised to defuse the immediate crisis on the Korean Peninsula, at least temporarily. However, the Rubicon has been crossed. The US has made clear that it is no longer constrained by previous understandings on the use of nuclear weapons and is willing to wage nuclear war—in this case against an impoverished, backward and poorly armed enemy. Around the world, rivals and allies alike will be compelled to alter their strategic and military planning accordingly to ensure they can defend their vital interests.

The greatest danger in this situation is the lack of political understanding and preparation on the part of the working class in the US, Asia and internationally for the crisis that now confronts humanity. While the monstrous threats emanating from Trump have evoked a great deal of anxiety, fear and hostility, workers lack their own political strategy and party to end the danger of war. What is required now is the building of an international anti-war movement of the working class based on socialist principles and the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections as the mass revolutionary parties needed to lead it.