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US admiral must “imagine the unimaginable:” All-out war with North Korea

By Peter Symonds

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Comments Tuesday by Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), underscore the advanced state of US preparations for war with North Korea. Delivering a speech in Singapore, Harris dismissed warnings by various strategic analysts and military commentators that a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would cost millions of lives and was therefore unthinkable.

“Many people have thought about military options being unimaginable regarding North Korea,” Harris told the audience at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. “Folks, I must imagine the unimaginable,” he declared. Coming from Harris, who is on the front line of preparations for a US military attack on North Korea, the remark is the latest threat against Pyongyang.

Harris’s speech follows a call by US Defence Secretary James Mattis last week for American armed forces to be ready so as “to ensure that we have military options that our president can employ [against North Korea] if needed.” The previous week, President Trump urged his top military and intelligence chiefs to provide military options “at a much faster pace.”

The US Navy is currently engaged in large-scale joint exercises with South Korean naval vessels in waters off the Korean Peninsula. More than 40 warships are taking part, including the USS Ronald Reagan, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, along with its strike group of destroyers and a cruiser. Two nuclear-powered submarines—the USS Michigan and the USS Tucson—recently docked in South Korea and are in the area.

The naval war games are only the latest in a series of joint military drills and provocations that have greatly heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In another indication of the preparations for war, the US military in South Korea will next week practice the mass evacuation of American non-combatants in the event of a conflict. While the drill is being described as “routine,” it comes at a time when Trump and his top officials have declared that time is running out before the “military option” is used.

In his speech yesterday, Admiral Harris declared: “Combining nuclear warheads with ballistic missiles in the hands of a volatile leader, Kim Jong Un, is a recipe for disaster.”

In reality, the description and the danger are more applicable to Trump, who controls the world’s largest and most sophisticated nuclear arsenal and has threatened North Korea with “total destruction.”

The Pyongyang leadership has every reason to believe that the country faces an imminent military attack by the United States and its allies and to prepare accordingly. On Monday, the North Korean deputy ambassador to the UN, Kim In Ryong, warned that nuclear war “may break out any moment” and urged US allies not to take part if they wanted to avoid retaliation.

Kim told a UN disarmament committee that his country was the only state threatened by “such an extreme and direct nuclear threat” from the US and would not put its nuclear arsenal on the negotiating table unless that threat was removed. He also accused the US government of trying to stage a “secret operation aimed at the removal of our supreme leadership.”

The last comment is a reference to the “decapitation squads” formed by the US and South Korea under OPLAN 5015 to assassinate the top North Korean leaders. The South Korean media reported that such a unit is on board the USS Michigan, which is taking part in the joint exercises.

Admiral Harris also ratcheted up the pressure on Russia and China to impose more drastic sanctions on North Korea to force it to bow to US demands that it abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Beijing and Moscow have already agreed to harsh penalties in the latest UN resolution that bars key North Korean exports, including coal, iron ore and other minerals, and limits the sale of petroleum products to Pyongyang.

The latest Chinese trade figures, released last Friday, show a 37.9 percent fall in imports from North Korea in September, the seventh successive monthly decline, and a 6.7 drop in Chinese exports to North Korea. On Monday, Russia confirmed that it had banned North Korean imports of zinc, silver, copper and nickel, suspended scientific and technical cooperation and banned the export of helicopters and vessels.

Nevertheless, Harris declared that the world and the region expected and needed China to do more. North Korea’s trade dependence on China meant that “Beijing has exponentially more influence on Pyongyang than anyone else, which makes China the key to a peaceful outcome on the Korean Peninsula,” he stated. Harris said it remained to be seen whether Russia would be helpful or the opposite.

Trump’s disavowal last week of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran makes clear that Washington has no intention of negotiating in good faith with North Korea. The only “peaceful outcome” that Trump is contemplating is the complete capitulation of Pyongyang to a never-ending series of US demands aimed at weakening and removing the regime.

Harris’s remarks again demonstrate that the US confrontation with North Korea is one component of a broader strategy aimed against China, Russia and any power that threatens the global hegemony of American imperialism.

Harris again demanded that China stop its “provocative actions” in the South China and East China Seas. In reality, it is the US that has greatly heightened tensions in these disputed waters. Harris has been in the forefront in pressing for confrontational “freedom of navigation” operations that involve sending US warships to challenge Chinese territorial claims.

Having deliberately ramped up the confrontation with North Korea, the Trump administration has created a highly dangerous situation where a mistake or miscalculation could precipitate a catastrophic conflict on the Korean Peninsula that could rapidly drag in major powers such as China and Russia.