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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.06.2020

North Korea blows up liaison office to send message to Trump

In a measure of the sharp tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the North Korean regime yesterday melodramatically demolished its joint liaison office with South Korea. While nominally directed at Seoul, Pyongyang's action expressed its deep frustration with the failure of the Trump administration to conduct any meaningful negotiations to end North Korea's isolation.

In June 2018, Trump abruptly shifted from his previous bellicose threats to annihilate North Korea and held an unprecedented summit in Singapore with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un which vaguely outlined a deal to end economic sanctions on North Korea in exchange for a shutdown of its nuclear program.

The liaison office located in the North Korean city of Kaesong was established in September 2018 as a sign of good will following summit meetings between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The office has been closed since January after North Korea sealed its borders in a bid to isolate the country from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relations between the two Koreas rapidly began to deteriorate after a second summit between Trump and Kim in Vietnam in February 2019 broke down over the US refusal to offer any sanctions relief to North Korea prior to the complete dismantling of its nuclear facilities and arsenal.

North Korea lashed out at the Moon administration in March 2019 declaring that it was not playing a mediating role, but rather was "a player, not an arbiter" because it remained a US military ally. While offering the prospect of better relations between the two Koreas,

Moon did nothing to lift sanctions on North Korea. The joint industrial complex in Kaesong, where South Korean businesses exploited cheap North Korean labour, remained closed.

After it ended its testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, Trump has simply strung North Korea along offering nothing in return. Trump briefly met with Kim last June in the demilitarised zone separating the two Koreas, but working level talks in Sweden came to nothing. Pyongyang set a deadline of the end of last year for a deal with the US, which the Trump administration simply ignored.

By blowing up the liaison office and criticizing South Korea, the North Korean regime has chosen to send a message to Washington, indirectly rather than directly. As South Korean analyst Lee Seong-hyon told the *New York Times*: “It [North Korea] had to vent its frustration and domestic discontent, but it feared retaliation if it directly provoked the United States. So, as Koreans like to say, ‘If you hate your neighbor, you kick his dog’.”

Lee pointed to North Korea’s economic frailty which has only worsened after it was forced to close its borders due to the pandemic. The crippling US-led sanctions had already impacted heavily on the North Korean economy by cutting off much of its foreign trade by banning or restricting exports of minerals and imports of many items included much needed petroleum products.

After it closed its border with China, its top trading partner, North Korea has been starved of foreign exchange and vital goods. Chinese customs has reported a 24 percent decline in trade with North Korea for the first two months of 2020. Chinese exports fell to \$198 million and imports from North Korea to just \$10 million, a 74 percent decline compared with the same period in 2019.

For the first time since 2003, North Korea has been compelled to resort to raising bonds in order to plug a huge hole in its budget. The bonds are reportedly needed to cover 60 percent of the budget. While the majority will be sold to state enterprises, some 40 percent will be sold to private entrepreneurs or *donju*, who have been encouraged by the regime. Desperate for relief, Pyongyang has appealed to the United Nations, non-government organisations and some countries for pandemic assistance.

At the same time, tensions with South Korea have sharpened after rightwing groups have again started sending anti-communist propaganda across the border via balloon. While the Moon administration has cracked down on such activities, Kim Yo Jong, the sister and

ally of the North Korean leader, declared on Saturday: “Before long, a tragic scene of the useless north-south joint liaison office completely collapsed would be seen.”

The destruction of the liaison office has been accompanied by North Korea’s cutting off of the most important communication channels with South Korea’s military, diplomats and the presidential office. Pyongyang has also announced that it will return troops to areas close to the DMZ that were previously removed as a token of better relations between the Koreas.

The refusal of the Trump administration to make any concessions to Pyongyang is threatening once again to inflame one of the world’s most dangerous flash points. While North Korea tested short range missiles in March, it has refrained from testing long range missiles or nuclear weapons. To do so would end the possibility of a deal with Washington and result in a return of Trump’s previous belligerent threats.

The US State Department yesterday responded to the demolition of the liaison office with a pro-forma appeal to North Korea “to refrain from further counterproductive actions” and a declaration that it “fully supports” Seoul’s efforts to maintain peaceful relations. But that could change.

The Trump administration is already engaged in an escalating confrontation with China, attempting to make it the scapegoat for the COVID-19 pandemic as well as imposing economic penalties and ramping up the US military build-up in the region. It has also recklessly encouraged its strategic partner India in its tense border stand-off with China that threatens to trigger a war between the nuclear-armed powers.

In his determination to challenge China across the board, Trump has increased provocative US “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea, and boosted relations with Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a sovereign part of China. In this context, the Korean Peninsula could rapidly become another arena for geo-political rivalry and conflict between the US and China.

World Socialist 17.06.2020