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Trump administration presses for more options for war on North Korea

More ominous signs are emerging that the Trump administration is in the advanced stages of preparing a pre-emptive military attack on North Korea that has the potential to trigger a catastrophic war in North East Asia and the world.

A lengthy *New York Times* article on Thursday revealed that the Pentagon is under intense pressure from the White House to provide Trump with options for a limited military strike on North Korea—a “bloody nose” scenario designed to frighten the North Korean regime into giving up its nuclear arsenal.

During last year, Trump repeated his bellicose threats to rain “fire and fury” and “totally destroy” North Korea if it did not capitulate to US demands to denuclearise. Citing unnamed American officials, the *New York Times* reported: “The national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, believes that for Mr Trump’s warnings to North Korea to be credible, the United States must have well-developed military plans.”

The article continued: “But the Pentagon, they say, is worried that the White House is moving too hastily towards military action on the Korean Peninsula that could escalate catastrophically. Giving the president too many options, the officials said, could increase the odds that he will act.”

Spokesmen for Defence Secretary James Mattis and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Joseph Dunford both denied that the Pentagon was dragging its feet. But tactical differences within the White House over a pre-emptive US military attack on North Korea have been evident for months.

Occasionally, the debate has erupted into the open, as last October, when Trump publicly declared that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was “wasting his time” trying to negotiate with Pyongyang. Given that the US president has insisted he will not allow North Korea to build nuclear missiles capable of reaching North America, the only alternative is the so-called military option.

According to the *New York Times*, Mattis and Dunford have argued forcefully for a diplomatic solution. “They have repeatedly warned, in meetings and on video conference calls, that there are few, if any military options that would not provoke retaliation from North Korea,” the article stated.

The concern is not just North Korea’s limited nuclear arsenal, but its sizeable conventional forces, including thousands of rocket launchers and long-range artillery pieces capable of raining shells on the South Korean capital of Seoul, a city of 25 million. The estimated death toll runs into tens of thousands—in just the first hour.

Another warning sign is the White House decision to drop Victor Cha, a prominent academic and former Bush administration official, as its nominee for the post of US ambassador to South Korea. The *Washington Post* reported on Tuesday that South Korea had already signed off on Cha, but his nomination was abruptly terminated over his disagreement with a pre-emptive strike on North Korea.

The *Financial Times* reported that National Security Council (NSC) officials interviewing Cha asked whether he would help evacuate American non-combatants from South Korea in advance of a US military attack on North Korea. Cha, who has always adopted a hawkish stance toward North Korea, reportedly expressed reservations.

Cha wrote an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* on Tuesday entitled “Giving North Korea ‘a bloody nose’ carries a huge risk to Americans.” He pointed out that on any given day, there were 230,000 Americans in South Korea and 90,000 or so in Japan, making evacuation virtually impossible under North Korean fire.

The US would not be able to protect American citizens in South Korea, let alone millions of South Koreans, Cha stated. “To be clear: The president would be putting at risk an American population the size of a medium-size US city—Pittsburg, say, or Cincinnati—on the assumption that a crazy and undeterrable dictator will be rationally cowed by a demonstration of US kinetic power.”

A third warning sign came in Trump’s State of the Union address this week. He not only warned that North Korea could “very soon threaten our homeland,” but denounced the

“cruel regime” that oppresses its people. Very pointedly, he praised a North Korean defector, Ji Seong-ho, who was seated in the first lady’s box.

Trump invited eight North Korean defectors to the White House yesterday, where he condemned previous US administrations for not acting against North Korea. “We have no road left,” he warned. “We’ll see what happens. We’ll get through the Olympics, and maybe something good will come of the Olympics.”

The Trump administration reluctantly and belatedly agreed with South Korea to suspend massive joint military exercises until after the Winter Olympics, due to begin in South Korea on February 9. Talks between the two Koreas have enabled North Korea to send a team to participate in the Olympics, and led to speculation that talks and an agreement to end the dangerous tensions might be possible.

However, Trump’s decision to invite North Korean defectors to the White House is a calculated affront to the Pyongyang regime, designed to undermine the possibility of talks. It demonstrates once again that Trump has little interest in negotiations, as also shown by his determination to sabotage the nuclear deal that the Obama administration reached with Iran in 2015.

While the White House is pushing the Pentagon for more detailed war plans against North Korea, advanced preparations already have been made. These include stationing nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers at US bases in Guam within easy striking distance of North Korea. The annual Foal Eagle and Key Resolve joint exercises in South Korea will commence in March, involving hundreds of thousands of troops, backed by warships, military aircraft, in what is a dress rehearsal for war with North Korea.

Air Force General Paul Selva, vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the media on Tuesday he was confident the US military could destroy most of the North Korean nuclear missile arsenal and its infrastructure. Indicating the scale of what is being contemplated, he said: “Remember, missile infrastructure is not just the missiles. If you’re the poor sergeant that has to be out and launch the missile, and I blow up your barracks, you’re not available to go do your job.” When asked, Selva did not rule out a pre-emptive attack.

What is not discussed in the American media is the Trump administration’s obvious riposte to those like Cha who warn of North Korean retaliation. That would be to launch a massive US pre-emptive strike, which could include nuclear weapons, to destroy North Korea’s military, industry and leadership.

Such an attack threatens to drag other nuclear-armed powers, such as Russia and China, into a global conflagration. The release of Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review on Friday,

outlining a far more aggressive attitude toward the use of nuclear force, as well as the development of a new range of nuclear weapons, indicates that Washington is preparing for that eventuality as well.