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US-led strike on Syria inflames tensions over Korea

The decision of Washington, London and Paris to launch missile strike against Syria on April 9, risking a direct military clash with Russian forces in the country, is reverberating internationally. As the Trump administration prepares for talks with North Korean President Kim Jong Un over his country's nuclear program, it is inflaming military tensions in East Asia.

Last August, on the anniversary of the US atom bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Trump threatened North Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen” if it did not abandon its nuclear program. At the time, the Chinese foreign ministry let it be known that such actions might provoke Chinese intervention in a US war against North Korea. Its spokesman Geng Shuang refused to confirm or deny whether China would intervene militarily in North Korea after a US attack, declaring it “a hypothetical question which it is hard to answer.”

That is, Beijing left open the possibility that, as in 1950 during the Korean War, it might attack US troops in Korea to keep them from marching through North Korea to attack China or Russia.

Now, US think tanks are recklessly hailing the April 9 strike as proof that Washington can thrust aside such warnings from its nuclear-armed rivals, and threaten to bomb North Korea if it does not cut an acceptable deal with Trump. Dakota Wood of the Heritage Foundation told CNBC: “If the US now says that it will not tolerate North Korea's offensive military capabilities, Kim's government will have to take that statement seriously and consider potential military consequences.”

Bombing Syria “gives the US more leverage in nuclear discussions with North Korea,” said Andrea Taylor of the more Democratic-leaning Atlantic Council. She claimed it increases “US credibility in the eyes of countries across the world, whether it’s Moscow, Tehran or Pyongyang.”

Amid growing concern in Tokyo at the danger of being sidelined in the Trump-Kim talks, sections of the Japanese political establishment similarly hailed the strikes on Syria as an opportunity to intimidate North Korea. The *Asahi Shimbun* wrote: “Government officials are hoping that the latest bombing of Syria can be used to demonstrate to Pyongyang that Washington would not hesitate to use force if necessary. A high-ranking Defense Ministry official said the air strikes will ‘send a strong message to North Korea’ that the United States would take military action.”

The *Japan Times* wrote that the April 9 strike will “serve as a stark reminder to North Korea of the 2011 US-led intervention in Libya that ended in the gruesome execution of its leader.” NATO’s war in Libya—which directly preceded its proxy war in Syria—ended, the paper noted, with Gaddafi being “sodomized with a bayonet before being shot dead immediately after his capture in 2011.”

The *Japan Times* also remarked that the North Korean regime follows Middle East events very carefully in order to formulate its own policies, and in particular to explain the necessity from its standpoint of obtaining nuclear weapons. In 2013, after the NATO murder of Gaddafi, the North Korean regime justified its argument that a nuclear arsenal is critical to its national security with an allusion to Libya, citing “the tragic consequences in those countries which abandoned halfway their nuclear programs.”

In Washington and Tokyo, sections of the ruling elite are hostile to Trump’s plan to meet with Kim. Their calls for Trump to exploit a summit to bludgeon North Korea into submission with military threats only heighten tensions, which, just like the NATO powers’ strikes in Syria, could explode into conflict between major nuclear powers. In particular, the Chinese regime has made clear that it views the threats against North Korea as a challenge against its basic national security, for which China has gone to war in the past and might do so again.

China’s hawkish, state-run *Global Times* newspaper responded to the April 9 strike with an editorial titled, “After Syria strikes, will North Korea be next?” Noting the US dispatch of the carrier USS Carl Vinson to the Asia Pacific region, it warned that a US strike on North Korea, like the recent strike on Syria, could rapidly escalate into war.

It wrote, “In view of Pyongyang’s several thousand artillery pieces and a large number of short-range missiles aimed at Seoul, a symbolic strike against North Korea by the US would bring a disaster to the people in Seoul... Once Washington resorts to military means toward Pyongyang, it is unlikely to be limited to nuclear facilities and related military infrastructure. A US-South Korea joint ‘decapitation attack’ against the North is highly possible. Thus, a military strike on the North will very likely evolve into large-scale bloody war on the Peninsula.”

While the *Global Times* did not spell this out, a US act of aggression along these lines, as the Chinese foreign ministry’s statement last year made clear, could rapidly escalate into an all-out regional and global war. The *Global Times* warned the North Korean regime not to undertake any action, like a new nuclear test, that could provoke a US military response.

As in Syria, the ruling elites of the major capitalist powers involved see no way out besides stepping up threats of vast military conflicts. If his summit with Kim goes ahead, Trump will undoubtedly use every means at his disposal, including blunt military threats, to make clear that Pyongyang effectively has only two options: reaching an agreement based on surrendering to US terms on its nuclear arsenal and entering US imperialism’s political orbit, or a US military onslaught posing the danger of nuclear annihilation.

Should North Korea attempt to reach a deal, however, it is increasingly clear that this would simply be a prelude to stepped-up US intrigues against North Korea’s neighbors, Russia and China, who are the unstated targets of US threats against Syria and North Korea. By bombing Syria despite the presence of Russian troops there, and threatening North Korea despite warnings from China, Washington has made clear that it will not let itself be deterred by the danger of all-out war with nuclear-armed states.