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## US naval “armada” menaces North Korea

By Peter Symonds

25 April 2017

With tensions on the Korean Peninsula already on a knife-edge, the US has dispatched the nuclear-powered submarine, the USS Michigan to the region. The submarine, which is capable of launching up to 150 Tomahawk cruise missiles from more than 1,500 kilometres, is due in the South Korean port of Busan today.

The arrival of the USS Michigan coincides with intense media speculation that North Korea will conduct a nuclear or ballistic missile test to mark its Military Foundation Day. The Trump administration has repeatedly declared that the US will use “all options” to prevent Pyongyang developing a nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of hitting the American mainland.

At the same time, the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, complete with its strike group of guided missile destroyers and cruiser, is headed toward waters off the Korean Peninsula. The Carl Vinson was last reported in the Philippine Sea where it rendezvoused with two Japanese destroyers and will meet up with South Korean warships as it heads north. The US and South Korean air forces are also currently involved in joint war games.

The USS Ronald Reagan and its carrier strike group are based at the Japanese port of Yokosuka.

Earlier this month, President Trump warned North Korea that the US was “sending an armada” to North East Asia. “We have submarines. Very powerful. Far more powerful than the aircraft carrier. That I can tell you,” he told Fox Business Network.

Trump reinforced the threat yesterday when he met with the ambassadors of members of the UN Security Council, declaring that the status quo in North Korea was “unacceptable.” In calling on the UN to impose additional and stronger sanctions, he branded Pyongyang’s rudimentary nuclear arsenal as “a real threat to the world,” “a big world problem” that “we have to finally solve.”

US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, warned that Washington would not ignore North Korea’s weapons’ testing saying: The United States is not looking for a fight so don’t give us a reason to have one.” She again called on China to put pressure on its ally North Korea to halt its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

In a tweet last weekend, Trump again insisted that Beijing take action against Pyongyang. “China is very much the economic lifeline to North Korea. So while nothing is easy, if they want to solve the North Korean problem, they will.”

In a phone call with Trump on Sunday, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged caution. While “adamantly opposing” any contravention of UN resolutions by North Korea, Xi, according to Chinese reports, “hoped that all sides exercise restraint and avoid doing things that exacerbate tensions on the peninsula.”

The Chinese government is deeply concerned that the US could trigger a war on its doorstep and has been pushing for the resumption of negotiations with concessions both by the US and North Korea. “Only if all sides live up to their responsibilities and come together from different directions can the nuclear issue on the peninsula be resolved as quickly as possible,” Xi reportedly said.

Trump also spoke by phone with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who told reporters yesterday: “We’ll maintain close contact with the US and high level of monitoring and surveillance as we respond firmly on North Korea.” He said that his government agreed with Trump to “strongly demand that North Korea” show restraint and denounced Pyongyang for being “repeatedly dangerous and provocative.”

The Abe government has ramped up anxieties in Japan by issuing civil defence advice on how to respond in the event of a ballistic missile attack: to take shelter underground or in the nearest strong building. It previously suggested that plans were being drawn up for the evacuation of thousands of Japanese citizens from South Korea in the event of a conflict.

Backed by a compliant media, the US along with its allies continue to demonise the Pyongyang regime, branding it as a threat to the region and the world. While pressuring China, the Trump administration has also repeatedly declared that it is prepared to “solve” North Korea by itself.

The incessant drum beat was continued last week with statements from the US defence and state departments. Pentagon spokesman Gary Ross condemned Pyongyang for “provocative, destabilizing actions and rhetoric, saying: “North Korea’s unlawful weapons programs represent a clear, grave threat to US national security.”

The State Department denounced North Korea in similar terms before issuing a thinly veiled warning. “We do not seek military conflict, nor do we seek to threaten North Korea. However, we will respond to threats to us or our allies accordingly,” a spokesperson declared.

The North Korean regime has responded in kind with bloodcurdling threats to the US, which hand Washington a pretext for its military build-up. It branded the deployment of the USS Carl Vinson as “an extremely dangerous act by those who plan a nuclear war to invade the North” and declared that it was ready to turn the aircraft carrier into a “great heap of scrap metal” and to “bury it in the sea.”

The Trump administration has deliberately ratcheted up tensions on the Korean Peninsula, threatening pre-emptive military strikes if Pyongyang proceeds to conduct a sixth nuclear test or further ballistic missile launches. In such conditions, a miscalculation or mistake could trigger a conflict that would rapidly spiral out of control and draw in nuclear-armed powers such as China and Russia.