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Behind the US war drive against North Korea

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The test firing by North Korea of a short-range missile on Monday, the latest in a series of similar missile trials, has provoked another round of condemnations and warnings by Washington and its allies, amid a continuing US military build-up near the Korean Peninsula. The US Navy announced last week that it was deploying the USS Nimitz and its battle group to the region, bringing to three the number of aircraft carriers able to direct their massive fire power against North Korea.

President Trump responded to the missile test by tweeting that North Korea had shown “great disrespect” towards its neighbour China, which was “trying hard” to compel Pyongyang to bow to US demands to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Washington has placed immense pressure on Beijing, above all through the threat of a war on its doorstep, to use its economic muscle to rein in the Pyongyang regime.

Speaking on CBS's "Face the Nation" on Sunday, US Defence Secretary James Mattis made clear that China had limited time. He condemned North Korea as "a direct threat to the United States," adding: "We don't have to wait until they have an intercontinental ballistic missile with a nuclear war head on it." Mattis warned that any war with North Korea would be "catastrophic" and involve "probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes."

The US war drive against North Korea has been accompanied by an incessant campaign in the media vilifying the Pyongyang regime and the alleged threat posed by its tiny nuclear arsenal. Mattis has already indicated that any attempt by North Korea to use a nuclear weapon would be met with an "effective and overwhelming" response—that is, annihilation, using America's huge nuclear armoury.

Like the US-led conflicts in the Middle East, North Korea's "weapons of mass destruction" and its gross human rights abuses have become convenient pretexts for preparing a war against a small, isolated and economically backward country. US imperialism has other, predatory, economic and geo-strategic objectives. Above all, a war to destroy the Pyongyang regime would be aimed at weakening and undermining China, which has always regarded North Korea as an important buffer against the US and its allies in North East Asia—Japan and South Korea.

Nor is the sudden rise in tensions on the Korean Peninsula solely due to Trump and his administration's militaristic propensities. Rather Trump's aggressive and menacing stance against North Korea is a product of rapidly sharpening geo-political rivalries in Asia and throughout the world, fuelled by the ever worsening capitalist breakdown in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the chief objective of US strategy has been to prevent any economic or military challenge from its rivals and, in particular, to prevent the Eurasian landmass from being dominated by one or more competitors.

Former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski spelled out the rationale in 1997 in *Foreign Affairs*: "What happens with the distribution of power on the Eurasian landmass will be of decisive importance to America's global primacy and historical legacy ... In a volatile Eurasia, the immediate task is to ensure that no state or combination of states gains the ability to expel the United States or even diminish its decisive role."

Between 1950 and 1953, the US waged a criminal war on the Korean Peninsula against China, which cost the lives of millions, in order to ensure its dominant position in North East Asia. Washington's attitude to Pyongyang, with which it never signed a peace treaty, has, ever since, been one of unrelenting hostility. After the demise of the Soviet Union, American strategy has been based upon regime change and the incorporation of North Korea into its sphere of influence, at China's expense. The US failed to live up to its side of the agreements, struck in 1994 and 2007 with North Korea, to denuclearise.

The rising danger of a US attack on North Korea coincides with a barely disguised civil war over foreign policy raging within the American political establishment and state apparatus. The differences are, in reality, tactical: whether in its drive for dominance of Eurasia, the US should focus first on Russia or on China. The constant barrage of accusations against the Trump administration's alleged links to Russia is driven by opposition to his efforts to reorient US foreign policy towards a confrontation with Beijing, rather than Moscow.

Washington's unrelenting pressure on Beijing over North Korea is, in part, a response to growing signs that the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—which was intended to isolate and militarily encircle China—is unravelling. The tilt by the Philippines, under President Rodrigo Duterte, away from Washington and towards closer relations with Beijing, is the most obvious sign of similar drifts elsewhere in Asia and internationally to take advantage of economic opportunities in China.

The US is also facing challenges in Europe, most openly from Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel declared, after the weekend's G7 meeting, that "we Europeans must really take our destiny into our hands," rather than relying on the US. Earlier this month, China formally launched its ambitious One Belt, One Road initiative—a plan for massive infrastructure spending on roads, ports, pipelines, rail links and telecommunications across Eurasia, linking China to Europe. Significantly Germany and Britain, which have both looked to boost economic relations with China, were strongly represented at the gathering in Beijing.

Unable to outbid China economically, the US is preparing to use its military might to undermine a potential competitor and disrupt the relations of its rivals with Beijing—and not for the first time. In 2002, President Bush tore up an agreement with North Korea to denuclearise and branded it part of an "axis of evil," along with Iran and Iraq. In doing so, he effectively sabotaged South Korea's so-called "Sunshine Policy" which, with the backing of China and the European powers, was a plan to transform the Korean Peninsula into a transport and pipeline conduit to link Europe and East Asia.

Fifteen years later, the stakes are far higher and the threat of war much greater. Facing a mounting political crisis and acute social tensions at home, the Trump administration is resorting to more and more reckless measures to try to assert US dominance. Whether on the Korean Peninsula or another flashpoint, such as the South China Sea, US imperialism is being driven to take military measures that would threaten to precipitate a war between nuclear armed powers and a catastrophic conflagration.