

Breaking: Trump “Climbs Down” on China, North Korea. Threats But No Immediate Military Action Contemplated

After weeks of threats of unilateral military action, joint statement by US Secretary of State Tillerson and US Defense Mattis appears to call that option off.

By [Alexander Mercouris](#)

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Following weeks of threats and bombast, with wild talk of the US fleet closing in on North Korea, of the US taking ‘unilateral action’ to stop North Korea’s ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programmes, and after the entire US Senate was called for a briefing in the White House - which in the event [produced precisely nothing and which lasted all of 14 minutes](#) - the US today after the briefing announced a policy of more of the same: of trying to stop the North Korean nuclear weapons programme through “sanctions and diplomatic pressure”.

This is set out in [a joint statement](#) following the briefing made by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and US Defense Secretary James Mattis. The statement reads as follows

Past efforts have failed to halt North Korea’s unlawful weapons programs and nuclear and ballistic missile tests. With each provocation, North Korea jeopardizes stability in Northeast Asia and poses a growing threat to our Allies and the U.S. homeland.

North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is an urgent national security threat and top foreign policy priority. Upon assuming office, President Trump ordered a thorough review of U.S. policy pertaining to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.).

Today, along with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joe Dunford, we briefed Members of Congress on the review. The President’s approach aims to pressure North Korea into dismantling its nuclear, ballistic missile, and proliferation programs by tightening economic sanctions and pursuing diplomatic measures with our Allies and regional partners.

We are engaging responsible members of the international community to increase pressure on the D.P.R.K. in order to convince the regime to de-escalate and return to the path of dialogue. We will maintain our close coordination and cooperation with our Allies, especially the Republic of Korea and Japan, as we work together to preserve stability and prosperity in the region.

The United States seeks stability and the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. We remain open to negotiations towards that goal. However, we remain prepared to defend ourselves and our Allies.

There is no hint here of military action against North Korea save in self-defence i.e. following an armed attack by North Korea on the US or its allies. About that no one of course has ever had any doubt.

Certainly there is no suggestion here of military action in response to North Korean ballistic missile or nuclear tests, much less of pre-emptive military action to prevent such tests, and the statement suggests that those options, if they were ever seriously considered, have now been ruled out.

Though the statement says that “past efforts have failed to halt North Korea’s unlawful weapons programs and nuclear and ballistic missiles tests”, what it proposes – “pressure [on] North Korea ...by tightening economic sanctions and pursuing diplomatic measures with our Allies and regional partners” – is the same policy pursued by previous US administrations.

Either wiser counsels have prevailed, and President Trump has been talked out of whatever dangerous military action against North Korea he had planned, or the various threats and military moves of the last few weeks were never intended seriously, and were just a bluff. If so, then as discussed previously, [the bluff was called on Sunday](#), when China’s President Xi Jinping telephoned President Trump and warned him that China would not change its policy because of US threats.

The extent of the failure of the attempts to bluff China into taking tougher action against North Korea is illustrated by one telling fact: the statement does not even mention China – much less make demands of it – even though China has been the centre-piece of the diplomacy for weeks.

Whatever the truth of the matter President Trump has acted wisely if, as appears to be the case, he has pulled back from military action.

If he was bluffing – and that has to be by far the most likely explanation for his actions – then his bluff has been called, and he has been taught an important lesson, which is that with China one should never bluff.

Hopefully he will learn that lesson, and act on it in future.

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