

Russia Calls House Bill Aimed at North Korea an “Act of War.” Will the Senate Block H.R. 1644?

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Top Russian officials are concerned that a bill passed by the US Congress will do more than increase sanctions on North Korea. Moscow claims H.R. 1644 violates its sovereignty and constitutes an “act of war.”

On May 4, 2017, House Resolution 1644, the innocently named “[Korean Interdiction and Modernization of Sanctions Act](#),” was quickly passed by the US House of Representatives by a vote of 419-1 – and it was just as quickly labeled an “act of war” by a top Russian official.

Why was **Konstantin Kosachev**, chair of the Russian Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee, so alarmed about a US law ostensibly aimed at North Korea? After all, there had been no blistering partisan debate preceding the vote. Instead, the bill was handled under a “suspension of the rules” procedure usually applied to noncontroversial legislation. And it passed with only one dissenting vote (cast by Republican **Thomas Massie** of Kentucky).



Konstantin Kosachev (Source: globalzero.org)

So what did H.R. 1644 call for? If enacted, [the bill would amend](#) the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 to increase the president’s powers to impose sanctions on anyone in violation of certain United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding North Korea. Specifically, it would allow for expanding sanctions to punish North Korea for its nuclear weapons programs by: targeting overseas individuals who employ North Korean “slave labor”; requiring the administration to determine whether North Korea was a state sponsor of terrorism and, most critically; authorizing a crackdown on North Korea’s use of international transit ports.

H.R. 1644 Targets Foreign Ports and Air Terminals

What caught the eye of Russian critics was [Section 104](#), the part of the bill that presumed to grant the US “inspection authorities” over shipping ports (and major airports) far beyond the Korean Peninsula – specifically, ports in China, Russia, Syria, and Iran. The bill identifies more than 20 foreign targets, including: two ports in China (Dandong and Dalian and “any other port in the People’s Republic of China that the President deems appropriate”); ten ports in Iran (Abadan, Bandar-e-Abbas, Chabahar, Bandar-e-Khomeini, Bushehr Port,

Asaluyeh Port, Kish, Kharg Island, Bandar-e-Lenge, Khorramshahr, and the Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport); four facilities in Syria (the ports at Latakia, Banias, Tartous and the Damascus International Airport) and; three ports in Russia (Nakhodka, Vanino, and Vladivostok). Under the [proposed law](#), the US Secretary of Homeland Security could use the National Targeting Center's Automated Targeting System to search any ship, plane, or conveyance that has "entered the territory, waters, or airspace of North Korea, or landed in any of the sea ports or airports of North Korea." Any vessel, aircraft, or vehicle found in violation of this US law would be subject to "seizure and forfeiture."

House Bill Raises a Red Flag for Russia

"I hope [this bill] will never be implemented," Kosachev told [Sputnik News](#), "because its implementation envisions a scenario of power with forced inspections of all vessels by US warships. Such a power scenario is beyond comprehension, because it means a declaration of war."

Russian officials were understandably outraged by Congress' imperious move to extend the US military's authority to include surveillance of sovereign ports in the Russian Far East. Russia's Upper House heatedly noted that such actions constitute a violation of international law that was tantamount to a declaration of war.

"No country in the world, and no international organization, has authorized the US to monitor implementation of any resolutions of the UN Security Council," Kosachev observed.

He accused Washington of attempting to "affirm the supremacy of its own legislation over international law," an example of US "exceptionalism" that he claimed constitutes "the main problem of present-day international relations."

Kosachev's Upper House colleague, [Alexey Pushkov](#), underscored this concern.

"It is absolutely unclear how the bill will be implemented," Pushkov stated. "To control Russian ports, the US will have to introduce a blockade and inspect all ships, which amounts to an act of war." Pushkov argued that the lopsided 419-1 vote "indicates the nature of the legal and political culture of the US Congress."

Russia Challenges US Exceptionalism

Russia now fears that the US Senate maybe similarly inclined. According to [Sputnik News](#), the surveillance-and-interdiction amendment is "due to be approved by the Senate and then signed by US president **Donald Trump**."

Andrei Krasov, the First Deputy Head of the Defense Committee in Russia's Lower House, greeted news of the US move with a mixture of disbelief and indignation:

"Why on Earth did America assume the responsibilities? Who gave it such powers to control the seaports of our country? Neither Russia nor international organizations asked Washington to do so. One can only answer that any unfriendly step by the US administration against Russia and our allies will

receive a symmetrical adequate response. In any case, no American ship will enter our waters. Our armed forces and our fleet have every means to severely punish those who will dare to enter our territorial waters.”

Krasov suggested that Washington’s “saber-rattling” was another sign that the US has no interest in accommodating other members of the world community – especially rivals like China and Russia.

“These are heavyweights which, in principle, do not fit into the US’s overall concept on governing and ruling the whole world.”



Vladivostok, Russia. (Source: Britannica.com)

Vladimir Baranov, a Russian ferry line operator whose vessels ply the waters between Vladivostok and the North Korean port city of Rajin, told *Sputnik News* that

“the US physically cannot control Russian ports – you have to visit the Port Authority, demand documents, that sort of thing This is essentially a bluff by the US, an attempt to show that it controls the world.”

Alexander Latkin, a professor from the Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service, was similarly skeptical:

“How could the US control our ports operations? It might have been possible if the US possessed a percentage of the port’s equity but, as far as I know, all of the shareholders are Russian. It is essentially a political move by the US. The Americans don’t have any legal or economic basis for controlling our ports.”

Maxim Grigoryev, who heads Russia’s Foundation for the Study of Democracy, told *Sputnik Radio* that he found the proposed legislation “rather funny,” given that it fails to provide any details on what a US inspection intervention might entail nor does it provide any guidelines for conducting Pentagon inspections of internationally flagged foreign vessels and foreign port facilities.

“What happened is that the US judicial authority has empowered its executive counterpart to present a report on this matter, which includes telling whether the sanctions against North Korea are being violated via Russian, Korean, and Syrian ports,” Grigoryev stated. “The US doesn’t mind that it basically dictates that other countries must adhere to US legislation. Clearly, this is a preparation for some sort of statement to be made against Russia, Syria or China. The measure is unlikely to be related to real politics – because the US doesn’t have any jurisdiction over other countries – but this is an obvious foundation for some propaganda campaign.”

Adding to the growing uncertainty over rising US/Russia tensions, top Russian military officials have expressed alarm over signs that the Pentagon is making preparations for a preemptive nuclear strike on Russia.

Rising Concerns of a Nuclear Attack



Lt. Gen. Victor Poznihir (Source: gazeta.ru)

On March 28, 2017, [Lt. Gen. Victor Poznihir](#), Deputy Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces, warned that the placement of US anti-ballistic missiles near Russia's borders "creates a powerful clandestine potential for delivering a surprise nuclear missile strike against Russia." He repeated this concern again on April 26, when he alerted the Moscow International Security Conference that the Russian General Staff's Operations Command is convinced Washington is preparing to exercise the "nuclear option."

This terrifying news went virtually unnoted by the US media. On May 11, columnist **Paul Craig Roberts** (a former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Economic Policy under **Ronald Reagan** and former associate editor of *The Wall Street Journal*) cited Poznihir's comments in a clearly agitated blog post.

According to Roberts, a Google search revealed that this "most alarming of all announcements" had only been reported in a single US publication - the *Times-Gazette* of Ashland, Ohio. There were, Roberts reported,

"no reports on US TV, and none on Canadian, Australian, European, or any other media except RT [a Russian news agency] and Internet sites."

Roberts also was alarmed to discover that no "US senator or representative or any European, Canadian, or Australian politician has raised a voice of concern that the West was now preparing for a first strike on Russia" nor, it appeared, had anyone reached out to "ask Putin how this serious situation could be defused."

(Roberts has [previously written](#) that Beijing's leaders also fear the US has detailed plans for a nuclear strike on China. In response, China has pointedly reminded the US that its submarine fleet stands ready to destroy America's West Coast while its ICBMs go to work obliterating the rest of the country.)

"Never in my life have I experienced the situation where two nuclear powers were convinced that the third was going to surprise them with a nuclear attack," Roberts wrote.

Despite this existential threat, Roberts notes, there has been "zero awareness and no discussion" of the growing risks.

"Putin has been issuing warnings for years," Roberts writes. "Putin has said over and over, 'I issue warnings and no one hears. How do I get through to you?'"

The US Senate now has a critical role to play. The bill is currently before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The committee has an opportunity to acknowledge the

grave existential risks created by H.R. 1644 and make sure that no companion bill ever makes it to the Senate floor. If this precipitously ill-conceived legislation is allowed to survive, our own survival – and the survival of hundreds of millions of others around the world – cannot be guaranteed.

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