

North and South Korea agree to ease tensions following high-level talks

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North Korea and South Korea reached an agreement shortly before 1:00 a.m. Tuesday that has, for the moment, defused tensions on the peninsula. The “emergency high-level” talks began Saturday evening after Pyongyang issued an ultimatum demanding that Seoul cease propaganda broadcasts over the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two nations.

The two sides met at the Panmunjom village on the border. Taking part in the discussions for the South were National Security Advisor Kim Kwan-jin and Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo. For the North, Hwang Pyong-so, director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People’s Army, and Kim Yang-gon, the director of the United Front Department conducted the negotiations. At 2:00 a.m. Tuesday, the South’s Kim Kwan-jin held a press conference to announce six limited points of agreement.

First, the two sides agreed to hold additional talks in Seoul or Pyongyang at an early date to discuss various outstanding issues. Second, North Korea agreed to express “regret” over the landmine explosion which maimed two South Korean sergeants on a patrol along the DMZ on August 4. This stops short of a full apology and admission of responsibility for the incident.

In return, South Korea agreed to halt its propaganda broadcasts at 12:00 p.m. on August 25. These broadcasts were restarted after 11 years following accusations that Pyongyang was responsible for the landmine blast. Pyongyang agreed to lift its “quasi-state of war,” at the same time the broadcasts ceased.

The two sides also agreed to hold Red Cross talks in early September to prepare for family reunions of those separated by the 1950–53 Korean War. The reunions would potentially take place during Chuseok from September 26 to 28, a major holiday in both Koreas,

traditionally celebrated to mark the fall harvest.

Finally, the North and South agreed to boost more non-governmental exchanges in various fields between the two countries. Nothing, however, has been resolved.

North Korea’s Hwang Pyong-so appeared on North Korean television, declaring: “Through North-South emergency high-level contact this time, the South must have learned a serious lesson that it will bring an armed clash if it creates a groundless case and provokes the other side.”

South Korea’s presidential spokesman Min Gyeong-uk quoted President Park Geun-hye as saying: “I hope that the deal will serve as an occasion to resolve all inter-Korean issues through trust.”

Since coming to office, however, Park has often talked of building trust on the Korean Peninsula. Instead, she has firmly lined up her government behind the US agenda in the region, including a dangerous and provocative stance toward North Korea—which is essentially aimed at China.

While not taking the same confrontational stance toward Beijing as other US allies in the region, such as Japan and the Philippines, Park has used her summits with President Obama to express her support for Washington’s “pivot to Asia,” aimed against China and forcing it to accept the US dictates in the region.

In October 2014, South Korea agreed to delay the transfer of wartime operational control of its military, which the US has held since the Korean War. This means that in the event of war, Washington would take control of the South’s military. In December 2014, Seoul agreed to a military intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan, at Washington’s insistence, which would be crucial to a future joint anti-ballistic missile system in the region.

Despite this latest agreement and plans for talks in the future, the underlying US-generated geo-strategic tensions remain on the Korean Peninsula. The South was quick to emphasize that this agreement did not mean it was preparing for a North/South summit between Park and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The US expressed support for the agreement while at the same time, through the Pentagon, making clear that its aggressive stance on the peninsula would continue. Admiral Scott Swift, the US commander of the Pacific Fleet, stated: “The Pacific Fleet units are there being commanded by the 7th Fleet commander in support of Gen. (Curtis) Scaparrotti, and his responsibility for US forces on the peninsula is close collaboration with Republic of Korea forces.”

The agreement came after more than two weeks of accusations by each side against the other after Seoul first accused Pyongyang on August 10 of planting three landmines at a gate on the southern side of the DMZ. The US backed Seoul and helped carry out a so-called joint investigation into the explosion as part of the United Nations Command.

Seoul and Washington then engaged in a scare campaign to vilify Pyongyang as the sole aggressor by reporting the alleged movement of North Korean troops and naval vessels, so as to give the impression that the North was prepared to attack at any moment.

Washington and Seoul exploited the incident to stage a dangerous aerial provocation, with fighter jets, to “alarm North Korea.” South Korea’s government-funded Yonhap news agency also reported on Monday that the US was considering sending a B-52 bomber armed with bunker-buster bombs to South Korea as well as a nuclear-powered submarine, currently stationed at Yokosuka in Japan.

The events of the past two weeks demonstrate that a relatively minor episode can escalate drastically, not only on the Korean Peninsula, but anywhere in the Asian region where Washington has stoked tensions as part of its “pivot.” A simple miscalculation on the Korean Peninsula or in the East or South China Seas could quickly lead to a shooting war.

With the US continuing to isolate North Korea, including via crippling sanctions, the economic and political crisis gripping the Pyongyang regime will only continue to be exacerbated, leading to further instability on the peninsula. Washington will seize upon any

incidents no less ruthlessly and recklessly to assert its military presence in the region and increase pressure on China.



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