

Trump suggests talks while preparing for war with North Korea

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Having repeatedly threatened to take military action against North Korea, US President Donald Trump declared yesterday that he was willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. “If it would be appropriate for me to meet with him, I would absolutely, I would be honored to do it,” he told *Bloomberg News*.

Trump, underscoring that an offer was being made to the North Korean leader, said: “Most political people would never say that but I’m telling you under the right circumstances I would meet with him.”

The offer of talks is effectively an ultimatum: accept US terms for negotiations or confront the prospect of war. The US navy has positioned an aircraft carrier strike group and a nuclear submarine in waters off the Korean Peninsula and is engaged in joint exercises with South Korean and Japanese warships.

Trump’s declaration that he would be “honoured” to meet with Kim Jong-un also underscores the rank hypocrisy of Washington’s posturing on “human rights.” Its denunciations of human rights abuses, whether in North Korea or anywhere else, are turned on and off to suit US strategic and economic interests.

Trump warned last Thursday that there was “absolutely” a definite chance of a “major, major war” with North Korea, while at the same time adding that “we’d love to solve things diplomatically, but it’s very difficult.”

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spelled out the terms of any talks in a meeting of UN Security Council ministers last Friday. After declaring that the US “preferred a negotiated solution” to the confrontation, he added: “North Korea must take concrete steps to reduce the threat that its illegal weapons programs pose to the United States and its allies before we even consider talks.”

Tillerson insisted that North Korea would have to “denuclearise:” that is give up its nuclear facilities and weapons. “We will only engage in talks with North Korea when they exhibit a good-faith commitment to abiding by the Security Council resolutions and their past promises to end their nuclear programs,” he said.

The same message was delivered by White House press secretary Sean Spicer who emphasised that Trump would only meet with Kim “under the right circumstances.” He insisted that North Korea had to ratchet down its “provocative behaviour” immediately. “There’s a lot of conditions that I think would have to happen with respect to its behavior and to show signs of good faith. Clearly, conditions are not there right now.”

The threat of military action, however, is always in the background. Speaking at the UN last week, Tillerson reiterated that “all options” were on the table and warned of “catastrophic consequences” if a negotiated solution was not found. He pressed UN members to impose crippling sanctions on North Korea and to downgrade diplomatic relations, warning that they will be backed “with military action if necessary.”

Even as he offered to speak to Kim Jong-un, Trump told “Fox News” yesterday that the North Korean leader’s recent statements were “very inflammatory” and “horrible.” He declared, however, that he was not going to speak about his plans for military action or set “red lines” for North Korea. “I don’t want to talk about it. I can say this, he’s very threatening, he’s a big threat to the world,” Trump said.

The US president underscored his willingness to attack North Korea by referring to his cruise missile strikes on Syria last month. After criticizing President Obama for setting “red lines” to the Syrian government and not enforcing them, Trump added: “I actually

covered [Obama's] red line for him in Syria.”

The Trump administration is waging a concerted diplomatic offensive to exert maximum pressure on North Korea directly, or via its ally, China. Trump has spoken to the leaders of Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, inviting them to visit Washington. The Australian prime minister is due to meet the US president later this week.

India has announced that it will freeze North Korean assets and ban its military officers from training in the country. An external affairs ministry spokesman said that India was also banning travel, investigating North Korean-flagged ships and taking “financial measures” against Pyongyang.

Congressman Ed Royce, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, chided Trump for suggesting over the weekend that South Korea should pay \$1 billion in costs for the installation of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery. “We’ve got to stand with our allies. There can’t be any daylight right now,” Royce told the *Washington Post*.

The THAAD installation, which is part of US anti-missile systems that are central to preparations for war against China, as well as North Korea, have provoked widespread opposition and fed into the political crisis in South Korea. The country is in the midst of presidential elections following the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye. The frontrunner, Democrat Moon Jae-in, has postured as a THAAD opponent.

In a bid to prevent Trump’s comment from further fueling opposition in South Korea, national security adviser H.R. McMaster stepped in on Sunday to declare that the US would pay for the THAAD system “until any renegotiation.”

In his comments to the *Washington Post*, Royce urged the Trump administration to work more closely with Congress, which is due to begin discussing legislation today for new sanctions not only on North Korea, but also against banks and corporations that do business with Pyongyang. It will also push for North Korea to be put back on the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, allowing further penalties.

Comments to *USA Today* by former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton underscored that the prime target of US preparations for war is not so much North

Korea but China. North Korea has no oil or substantial natural resources, and, despite the continual denunciations of its nuclear weapons program, poses no significant threat to the US and its allies. But it is strategically located, sharing borders with China and Russia, and has acted as a buffer against US bases in South Korea and Japan.

Bolton, who was on Trump’s short-list for secretary of state, dismissed efforts to force North Korea to denuclearise and suggested that pressure be placed on China to accept the peaceful reunification of the Koreas under the auspices of South Korea. The alternative was a pre-emptive U.S. attack, with worse consequences for Beijing: “regime collapse, huge refugee flows and US flags flying along the Yalu River [border with China].”

While the Trump administration does not spell it out, it is seeking one way or another to eliminate North Korea and weaken China, as it prepares for confrontation on other economic and strategic fronts. As Bolton crudely put it: “China can do it the easier way or the harder way: It’s their choice. Time is growing short.”



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