

As war tensions continue, signs emerge of talks with North Korea

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Even as the Trump administration seeks to maximise its pressure on North Korea, accompanied by the threat of military attack, behind-the-scenes talks appear to be underway over a diplomatic resolution to the highly volatile situation on the Korean Peninsula.

While warning of a “major, major war” with North Korea, Trump declared in late April that “we’d love to solve things diplomatically, but it’s very difficult.” Days later on May 1, he suggested he would be “honoured” to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, under the right circumstances.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spelled out the terms for such a meeting at a UN Security Council meeting late last month. “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.” He made clear that time was running short and the US had no intention of negotiating without significant concessions from Pyongyang in advance.

Having issued what amounts to an ultimatum—agree to our terms for talks, or confront war—the Trump administration has wound back its belligerent rhetoric against North Korea, for the time being. Trump has pressed China to use its economic clout to bully North Korea into line and appears to be giving Beijing a window of opportunity to achieve that goal.

Such diplomacy is, by its nature, carried on behind closed doors. Yet there are hints that some talks are underway.

The Chinese foreign ministry announced on Tuesday that North Korea would send an official delegation to a major forum next week in Beijing that will discuss China’s massive One Belt, One Road plans for transport and infrastructure linking the Eurasian landmass. “China is open-minded. Any like-minded

country, as long as you are interested, can participate in this initiative,” a foreign ministry spokesman declared.

Amid huge regional tensions, including between Beijing and Pyongyang, the North Korean delegation will clearly be discussing more than the country’s involvement in China’s plans. Just last week, North Korea lashed out against China for collaborating with the US in imposing sanctions and pushing for the dismantling of its nuclear weapons. A commentary accused Beijing of “insincerity and betrayal” and warned of “grave consequences” if relations between the two countries were “chopped down.”

Allowing North Korea to participate in China’s infrastructure projects would be a significant incentive for the isolated, impoverished country. At the same time, Beijing can apply substantial pressure on Pyongyang, which depends heavily on China for trade, including for the import of oil and food. The Chinese government has already agreed to UN sanctions and earlier this year suspended the import of North Korean coal and turned back North Korean ships from Chinese ports.

According to Japanese and South Korean newspapers, a North Korean delegation was to meet on Monday and Tuesday in Norway for backchannel discussions with former American officials. South Korea’s *Hankyoreh* website reported that Choe Son-hui, chief of Pyongyang’s North American bureau, met with Robert Einhorn in Oslo. Einhorn was a US State Department special adviser on non-proliferation and arms control under the Obama administration.

No details of the discussions were released. An unnamed State Department official acknowledged the talks were underway but denied the Trump administration was in any way involved. Despite this disclaimer, it is obvious the meeting was used to sound

out North Korea, and its contents will be relayed to the White House.

According to *Hankyoreh*, the Tokyo Broadcasting System cited an anonymous source as saying that, during his stay in Europe, Choe was coordinating a separate meeting with Trump administration officials.

An article in the *Japan Times* on Tuesday indicated in broad terms what the US is prepared to offer. “In return for North Korea ceasing its development of nuclear and missile technologies, the United States would not seek regime change, regime collapse or an accelerated reunification of the Korean Peninsula, nor would it look for an excuse to advance north of the 38th parallel, the de facto inter-Korean border,” it stated.

A day after he was elected, South Korean President Moon Jae-in yesterday announced he was willing to hold talks in Pyongyang and Washington in a bid to end the dangerous standoff that threatens war on the Korean Peninsula. During the election campaign, Moon indicated he would try to revive the so-called Sunshine Policy to improve diplomatic and economic relations between the two Koreas.

While Moon’s diplomacy might be useful to the Trump administration at present, to encourage North Korea to meet US demands, relations between South Korea and the US could deteriorate rapidly if a deal fails to materialise and the US turns to military action.

At this stage, North Korea has given no indication it is prepared to capitulate to US threats. It has repeatedly declared that it will not give up its nuclear weapons and has pointed to the fate of Gaddafi’s regime in Libya and Assad’s in Syria. After they struck agreements to abandon their nuclear and chemical weapons respectively, US-led efforts to oust them only intensified.

It is clear that the Trump administration is not going to wait indefinitely for talks to succeed. Moreover, as Secretary of State Tillerson declared earlier this month, the US is “not going to negotiate [its] way to the negotiating table.” In other words, any talks will take place on US terms or not at all.

An article in the *Korea Times* last month indicated the time frame involved. Citing Taiwan’s Central News Agency, it reported that China and North Korea had already engaged in secret talks. North Korea asked for three years to abandon its nuclear weapons, but China, aware of US demands, insisted that Pyongyang

dismantle its nuclear arsenal within three months and accept the framework within two to three weeks.

Thus, the danger of a disastrous war on the Korean Peninsula remains high. A US aircraft carrier strike group and nuclear submarine, along with South Korean and Japanese warships, remain offshore and US, Japanese and South Korean military forces throughout the region are on high alert. And as the Trump administration continually declares—all options, including the military one, remain on the table.



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