

# South Korean president tries to smooth disagreements with Washington

Ben McGrath  
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Differences have begun to emerge between South Korea's new president, Moon Jae-in, and Washington over the approach to North Korea. Moon's administration delayed the full installation of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery in South Korea and suggested a return to talks with North Korea if the latter halted its nuclear and missile testing.

An unnamed senior South Korean official told the Yonhap news agency on Sunday that US President Donald Trump expressed his anger over the halt to the THAAD deployment during a meeting with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis on June 8.

Moon called for an environmental impact assessment before the final four THAAD launchers are installed. Two launchers and the accompanying AN/TPY-2 X-band radar are already operational.

Seoul is attempting to smooth over any disagreements ahead of a June 29–30 summit in Washington between Moon and Trump. The South Korean president emphasized again on Tuesday: “The carrying out of the environmental impact assessment does not mean we are delaying or overturning the [THAAD] deployment.” His comment underscores the phony character of Moon's posturing as an opponent of THAAD during the presidential election.

In a recent interview with the CBS “This Morning” program, Moon praised Trump, as he has done in the past. “I highly commend President Trump's placing such great importance on the North Korean nuclear issue, and I also believe that thanks to President Trump's approach and attitude, there is a possibility of resolving this issue,” he said.

Asked if he would oppose a preemptive attack on North Korea, Moon did not reject such a possibility. “I believe that this is something we may—we can—discuss at a later

stage when the threat has become even more urgent,” he stated.

However, while giving his full support to South Korea's alliance with the US, Moon sought to ameliorate tensions with North Korea and also China. Beijing has repeatedly criticised the US deployment of the THAAD system to South Korea, pointing out that the powerful X-band radar can peer at military installations deep inside China.

Moon has suggested a revival of the so-called Sunshine Policy of former President Kim Dae-jung toward Pyongyang, which was aimed at opening up North Korea as a market and source of cheap labor for South Korean corporations. Speaking last Thursday on the anniversary of the 2000 Joint Declaration that eased tensions between the two Koreas, Moon declared: “I clearly state that we can engage in unconditional dialogue if North Korea ceases further provocations with its nuclear program and missiles.”

Washington is not willing to make any concessions, however. US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said Friday: “Our position has not changed. For the DPRK [North Korea], for us to engage in talks with the DPRK, they would have to denuclearize. And that is not something we're seeing them take any steps to do so.”

Trump previously said he would be willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un “under the right conditions.” Following the death this week of Otto Warmbier, a US citizen held in North Korea for 17 months and released last week in a coma, White House spokesman Sean Spicer effectively ruled out a meeting. “Clearly we're moving further away, not closer to those conditions,” he stated.

Another political figure in Seoul calling for a softer approach to Pyongyang is Professor Moon Chung-in, a special advisor to President Moon. He caused a stir on

Friday when he suggested at a seminar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington that the US and South Korea could consider scaling down the use of strategic assets, such as aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, during joint military exercises if North Korea suspends its nuclear and missile programs. Professor Moon said this was part of Seoul's plan for "incremental, comprehensive and fundamental" denuclearization of the North.

Seoul was quick to point out that Moon Chung-in's comments were his own private opinions and not necessarily held by the government. The president's office contacted the professor and "sternly" requested he "exercise restraint." The proposal to wind back joint US-South Korean military exercises if North Korea freezes its nuclear and missile programs has been made by China and rejected outright by the US.

Robert Manning of the US-based Atlantic Council think tank rejected any scaling back of the exercises. "Some of the ideas floated by President Moon and his top advisers seem to be dusting off old 'sunshine' ideas that failed," he said. Manning called for even tougher sanctions against the North, while saying that the US's shows of military force were excessive and counterproductive.

South Korean defense officials announced that two US B-1B strategic bombers took part in training exercises over the Korean Peninsula Tuesday, along with South Korean fighter jets. The officials claimed the drills were routine. In addition, the guided-missile destroyer USS Dewey made a port call at Jeju Island. The ship, part of the 7th Fleet, is preparing for joint drills with South Korean and Canadian naval vessels.

Seoul's attempts to reach out to Pyongyang cut across the Trump administration's efforts to ratchet up the pressure both on North Korea and China. Secretary of State Tillerson and Defence Secretary Mattis met with top Chinese officials in Washington yesterday and suggested that time was running out for a diplomatic solution to the confrontation with North Korea. By implication, they threatened military action.



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