

South Korean president aligns with US war plans against North Korea

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in concluded his first trip abroad as head of government on Saturday, holding a summit with Donald Trump in Washington, as well as meeting other political and business leaders.

Before the visit, cracks seemed to appear between the two administrations over the US regional anti-ballistic missile system known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD). However, Moon pledged his support for the US war drive against North Korea over two days of talks, dispelling any notion he is working to prevent a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

The meeting between Trump and Moon took place 51 days after the latter took office. This is the fastest a South Korean president has held a bilateral meeting with his or her US counterpart. It is an indication that the mild criticisms Moon made of the US during his presidential campaign were nothing more than an attempt to exploit Korean nationalism and anti-war sentiment in South Korea.

With the election out of the way, Moon reassured Washington he was committed to the military alliance between the two countries. At a joint press conference, he hailed the “deep trust and friendship between President Trump and I.”

Moon also thanked Trump for his so-called determination to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula, saying: “The most serious challenge facing South Korea and the United States is North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats. President Trump and I agreed to work closely [to] coordinate our related measures while placing the top priority on the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.”

South Korea’s president is backpedaling after previously pledging to seek dialogue and understanding with Pyongyang. In a joint statement, he agreed with Trump’s agenda to “fully implement existing sanctions

and impose new measures designed to apply maximum pressure on North Korea.”

The Trump administration has used the slogan “maximum pressure” to signify a change of course after declaring Barack Obama’s policy described as “strategic patience” a failure.

Since coming to office, Trump has drastically ratcheted up tensions in East Asia, threatening war against North Korea with three aircraft carrier strike groups now in the region along with other military assets. Washington has also demanded the full installation of the THAAD battery in South Korea, angering China, the primary target of the US military build-up in the Asia Pacific.

Moon and the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) are no less committed to this agenda. While the DPK may prefer to build economic connections with North Korea in order to exploit the latter’s working class as ultra-cheap labor, it is unwilling to go against the demands of the US, regardless of the catastrophic consequences for the Korean Peninsula and the region.

In fact, Moon pledged to continue developing South Korea’s own, already considerable, preparations for war, including the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) and the Kill-Chain, a system designed to launch preemptive attacks on North Korean military positions under the guise of stopping a missile launch.

Moon and Trump turned reality on its head, claiming that the US and South Korea “do not maintain a hostile policy toward North Korea,” yet threatened the small impoverished country with nuclear annihilation.

Their joint statement declared: “The two leaders affirmed the Alliance’s fundamental mission to defend the ROK [South Korea] through a robust combined defense posture and the enhancement of mutual security based on the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty.

President Trump reiterated the US commitment to provide extended deterrence to the ROK, drawing on the full range of US military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear.”

Trump and Moon claimed—largely for show—they were open to talks with Pyongyang, saying: “Noting that sanctions are a tool of diplomacy, the two leaders emphasized that the door to dialogue with North Korea remains open under the right circumstances.” However, those “right circumstances” would be Pyongyang’s complete prostration to US demands for its denuclearisation.

North Korea has repeatedly refused to give up its nuclear and missile programs, particularly after Washington reneged on previous deals, leaving these weapons as the only bargaining chips the North Korean regime has in potential negotiations.

The *Asahi Shimbun* reported on June 24 that Pyongyang had communicated its desire for talks with Washington, excluding Beijing. Robert Gallucci, a former US State Department special envoy on the North Korean nuclear program, stated that in talks last October in Kuala Lumpur, North Korea “appeared to want to improve relations with the US to reduce its dependence on China.” However, when Gallucci demanded that the North give up its nuclear program, Pyongyang’s envoy responded that it could not, as it had “no other means of guaranteeing our [regime].”

The US is ramping up pressure on China, heightening the risk of a major confrontation over North Korea, which would include the active participation of South Korea and Japan. Moon’s predecessor, the ousted Park Geun-hye, had distanced her government from Tokyo while seeming to move closer to Beijing.

Unlike Park, Moon has pledged to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe alongside Trump at the G20 meeting this week in Germany. The icy relationship between the two major US allies in North East Asia has compromised the Pentagon’s ability to integrate them into its war plans against North Korea and also China.

The Trump administration is not taking any chances, however. During a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing last Wednesday, the same day as Moon’s arrival, US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley praised Moon for making “good strides” toward Washington, but leveled a veiled warning. “At the end

of the day, I personally believe it’s going to work itself out,” she said. “But I also know that the [Trump] administration, the second we see something that’s not going in the favor of protection of our troops, then I know the president will act.”

That threat in the form of tougher US economic measures against South Korea was evident in the talks between Trump and Moon. The US president, who has previously called for the renegotiation of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, demanded more access for US vehicles to South Korean markets and an end to “dumped” South Korean steel in the US.

By ramping up the pressure over trade, the Trump administration is seeking to ensure that Moon remains in line not only over economic issues, but also over US military plans, including the full installation of the THAAD system in South Korea.



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