

South Korea proposes military talks with North Korea

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South Korea on Monday offered formal talks with North Korea for the first time under President Moon Jae-in, who has postured as an advocate of engagement with Pyongyang and peace on the Korean Peninsula. While Moon has gone to great lengths to express his agreement with the Trump administration, his agenda still risks causing fissures in the US-South Korea alliance.

Vice Defense Minister Seo Ju-seok proposed the talks for this Friday, to be held in the Demilitarized Zone between the North and South. He said: “In order to suspend hostile activities at the military demarcation line, we propose holding an inter-Korean military talk at Tongilgak.”

Seoul did not specify an agenda or level of representation, but possible topics include a cessation of cross-border propaganda leaflets and loudspeaker broadcasts, and an end to incursions by North Korea’s rudimentary drones. Pyongyang has yet to reply, but Seoul requested that a military hotline be reopened for any response. The last military working-level meeting between the two sides was held on October 15, 2014.

Moon’s government also proposed separate talks on August 1 regarding reunions of families split by the US division of the peninsula in 1945 and the 1950-53 Korean War. It is suggesting the event be conducted during Chuseok, a major Korean holiday in early October to celebrate the autumn harvest. If held, these talks would be the first since October 2015.

Washington has expressed opposition to the talks. Trump’s press secretary Sean Spicer stated: “I think the president has made clear in the past, with respect, that any type of conditions that would have to be met are clearly far away from where we are now.”

Beijing, on the other hand, expressed its support. Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said: “We hope

that the two Koreas will make efforts to break the stalemate and create conditions for a resumption of negotiations.”

Moon presented a preliminary plan for talks during a speech in Berlin on July 6, a day before the G20 summit. While echoing Washington’s demand for North Korea’s “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization,” he said “now is the last chance for North Korea to make the right decision and also the best time to do so. This is because we have reached the tipping point of the vicious circle of military escalation, and thus, the need for dialogue is more pressing than ever before.”

Pyongyang responded on July 15 in its main paper, the *Rodong Sinmun*. The commentary criticized Seoul, but did not outright reject Moon’s proposals, saying “it is a relief that the vow to honor and enforce” past inter-Korean agreements was also referenced in his speech, “a different stance from his [conservative] predecessors.”

Moon’s government has claimed several times since his meeting with Trump on June 29-30 that the United States was on board with his agenda for engagement with Pyongyang and that Seoul was “in the driver’s seat” on issues affecting the Korean Peninsula. Moon said in Berlin: “It has also been repeatedly confirmed that if the right conditions are met, the United States, China, and the rest of the international community are keeping the door open for dialogue at any time.”

For Washington, the “right conditions” before any talks can take place are Pyongyang’s commitment to denuclearization and prostration before US demands. On this point, differences are coming to the surface between the US and South Korea.

Bruce Klingner of the right-wing Heritage Foundation wrote after the Trump-Moon meeting:

“Washington will interpret Seoul’s leading role as limited to long-term peaceful unification rather than nuclear and missile threats, while the Moon administration senses US acquiescence to Moon’s broader agenda.” The “enduring differences” over the approach to North Korea “could cause future strains in the bilateral relationship.”

The entire South Korean bourgeoisie supports the US-South Korean military alliance, from which the ruling class has historically drawn its legitimacy. However, Moon and his Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) represent a faction that envisions turning North Korea into an ultra-cheap labor platform while deepening the South’s economic ties to China and Russia, the two main targets of US imperialism today.

This is one reason behind the DPK’s pushback against Washington over the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery. The installation has resulted in economic retaliation from Beijing, which fears the US will use THAAD’s X-band radar to spy on its territory. South Korean companies in China have suffered sharp declines in sales or have shut stores.

Furthermore, the DPK is trying to downplay the current military threat, conscious of intense public fear over a second, devastating Korean War. While the new government agrees with Washington that North Korea is to blame for the crisis, Moon came to office promising to seek dialogue with Pyongyang, generating hope he could avert war.

While trying to accommodate the US, the DPK finds it far more profitable to do business with China, Russia and Europe. In 2015, for example, bilateral trade between South Korea and the European Union reached over 90 billion euros (\$US103 billion) as a result of a free trade agreement (FTA) that commenced in 2011. Conversely, threats by the Trump administration to renegotiate the South Korea-US FTA have generated fears in Seoul over American protectionism. In fact, trade minister nominee Baek Un-gyu said Monday he would consider filing a complaint with the World Trade Organization over such measures.

Moon said in his Berlin speech he “planned a new economic map for the Korean Peninsula” that included cooperation projects in Northeast Asia between the two Koreas, China and Russia, such as the completion of a long-planned inter-Korean railway leading to Europe

and new gas pipelines.

Moon has previously discussed reopening and expanding the Kaesong Industrial Complex in North Korea, run by South Korean companies with North Korean labor. Seoul pulled out of Kaesong in February 2016, claiming Pyongyang was diverting 70 percent of the funds to its nuclear and missile programs.

Seoul is unable to fully realize these economic goals without coming into conflict with Washington’s efforts to isolate and strangle North Korea and ratchet up pressure on China. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has stated: “Any country that hosts North Korean guest workers, provides any economic or military benefits, or fails to fully implement UN Security Council resolutions is aiding and abetting a dangerous regime.”

Seoul is attempting to balance these military and economic interests without provoking US anger that could potentially include a behind-the-scenes operation to remove Moon from office.



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