

South Korea extends deadline for talks with the North

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North Korea has yet to respond to South Korea's offer of military talks that the latter had proposed for last Friday. Seoul urged Pyongyang to accept the proposal, keeping the deadline open for a response until this Thursday, the anniversary of the armistice agreement between the two sides that ended the Korean War in 1953.

Pyongyang published an article in *Rodong Sinmun* last Thursday criticizing Seoul. "Ditching confrontation and hostility is a precondition for opening the door for the two Koreas' reconciliation and unity," the article stated, but it did not outright reject the talks. On Friday, after it became clear Pyongyang would not respond, South Korea's Defense Ministry stated that it "once again calls on the North to respond positively to our offer as soon as possible."

Seoul has also reiterated that it will not backtrack from the international sanctions that have been slapped on North Korea in response to its nuclear and missile tests. Rather it is attempting to use the economic pressure generated by the sanctions to bring the Kim Jong-un regime to the negotiating table.

The South Korean government announced the offer of military talks at Panmunjom, along the border between the North and South, last Monday to ease border tensions between the two sides. It also proposed holding separate talks August 1 on conducting family reunions for those split by the US division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 and by the 1950-1953 Korean War.

The US responded coldly. Since Trump's inauguration, his administration has systematically ramped up the threat of war against North Korea.

"Conditions [for talks] that would have to be met are clearly far away from where we are now," said now-former White House press secretary Sean Spicer. US

Senator Cory Gardner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, went further, threatening military action: "The United States will deploy every economic, diplomatic, and if necessary, military tool at our disposal to deter Pyongyang and to protect our allies."

The US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Joseph Dunford said at the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado on Saturday, "Many people have talked about military options with words like 'unimaginable.' I would probably shift that slightly and say it would be horrific, and it would be a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes, and I mean anyone who's been alive since World War II has never seen the loss of life that could occur if there's a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

"But as I've told my counterparts, both friend and foe, it is not unimaginable to have military options to respond to North Korean nuclear capability. What's unimaginable to me is allowing a capability that would allow a nuclear weapon to land in Denver, Colorado. That's unimaginable to me. So my job will be to develop military options to make sure that doesn't happen."

The idea that South Korea, Japan, or other US allies need protection from North Korea is absurd. The US has waged wars and carried out violent regime change operations around the world since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite attempts by Pyongyang to open its economy to foreign capital by establishing special economic zones, Washington finds impoverished North Korea a convenient pretext for its military buildup in Asia ultimately directed at subordinating China and Russia.

Seoul quickly sought to reassure Washington that its offer was in line with the US position. "The proposal

for the early stage of contact to resolve humanitarian issues and ease cross-border tensions is a matter that is different from full-fledged talks for North Korea's denuclearization," said the Unification Ministry's vice spokeswoman Lee Yu-jin last Tuesday.

The South Korean bourgeoisie is committed to the US-South Korean military alliance, from which it has drawn its historic legitimacy following Washington's establishment of a police state in Seoul in 1948. However, the ruling class is divided between the conservatives, with longstanding ties to the military and Washington, and the Democrats, who favor friendlier relations with China to boost trade and turning North Korea into an ultra-cheap labor platform.

While the US exerts a great deal of pressure and influence on South Korea, the latter has grown into the 11th largest economy in the world. The ruling Democrats in their current incarnation as the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and the Moon Jae-in administration are engaged in a balancing act between Beijing and Washington, attempting to boost the South Korean economic interests on the one hand while maintaining US support on the other.

At the same time, the Moon administration is acutely aware of the deep concerns in South Korea about a new war on the Korean Peninsula and its proposals are a gesture towards placating widespread anti-war sentiment. Greater Seoul, a city of some 25 million people, lies within the range of North Korean rockets and artillery. According to some estimates, the casualties in the capital—dead and wounded—would be more than one million in the first few days of fighting.

North Korea is currently faced with tremendous external and internal pressures, including the worst drought this year since 2001. Pyongyang's missile launches and nuclear programs, their only bargaining chips short of complete capitulation, have not brought talks with the US as the regime had hoped.

Pyongyang may wait until the conclusion of next month's Ulchi-Freedom Guardian (UFG) military exercises between the US and South Korea, to decide on talks which it has not rejected outright. The North Korean regime has repeatedly denounced joint US-South Korean drills as the preparation for war and insisted they be called off to improve diplomatic relations and the prospects for talks.

The US and South Korean militaries conduct the

annual UFG war games in August, the second largest joint exercises between the two countries after the Foal Eagle/Key Resolve drills that are held each year in spring. Last year, 25,000 US troops and 50,000 South Korean soldiers took part in the exercises. This year's UFG war games are set to begin around August 21.



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