Talks between North and South Korea to proceed

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The first official meeting between the two Koreas in more than two years is scheduled for Tuesday after North Korea formally accepted a South Korean offer of talks yesterday. Both sides will convene at the truce village of Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone that divides the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea made the offer this week after North Korean leader Kim Jong-un used his New Year's address to call for talks "as soon as possible" to discuss North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics, scheduled for South Korea in February. More broadly Kim declared: "North and South must work together to alleviate the tensions and work together as a people of the same heritage to find peace and stability."

Early yesterday, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and his US counterpart Donald Trump agreed to delay the major Foal Eagle and Key Resolve joint military drills until after the Winter Olympics. Trump declared it would be a "good thing" if the meeting went ahead. These annual war games have always raised tensions with Pyongyang. They amount to a rehearsal for war with North Korea and last year involved more than 300,000 American and South Korean troops.

Within hours of the postponement of the war games, the North-South meeting was announced. Seoul's unification ministry said it received a fax from Ri Son-gwon, head of the North's Committee for Peaceful Reunification of Korea, saying Pyongyang would participate in the talks. North and South Korea also reopened their cross-border hotline on Wednesday for the first time in months.

The meeting will take place under conditions of extreme tension on the Korean Peninsula as a result of the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure" to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Faced with the prospect of the US taking military action against North Korea, the UN Security Council has imposed a series of crippling sanctions on the Pyongyang regime, which have been supplemented by even harsher unilateral US sanctions.

Earlier this week, Trump issued a belligerent tweet in response to North Korean leader Kim, who warned Washington his country had nuclear missiles capable of reaching any part of the United States and the nuclear button was always on his desk. In an open threat of nuclear conflict, Trump bragged that his nuclear button was "a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"

Trump boasted on Thursday that his aggressive stance had brought about the prospect of talks. "Does anybody really believe that talks and dialogue would be going on between North and South Korea right now if I wasn't firm, strong and willing to commit our total 'might' against the North," he tweeted on Thursday.

Speaking to CNN yesterday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson defended Trump's provocative comments and warned that efforts to secure a diplomatic solution to the standoff with North Korea were "backed by a strong military option." If the North Koreans continued their missile and nuclear tests, they "have to understand that the penalties to them will continue and will only grow more severe."

Tillerson reiterated that the US would accept nothing less than "the complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization of the Korean peninsula." This means the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and imposition of an ever-more intrusive inspection regime into its military and industrial infrastructure. Tillerson also made clear that North Korea needed to signal its willingness to denuclearize before negotiations with the US could begin.

North Korea has repeatedly declared that it will not

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give up its nuclear weapons without security guarantees from the United States and its allies. Successive US administrations have refused to offer such pledges or end the state of war and economic blockade that has continued since in the end of the 1950–53 Korean War.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis played down the decision to delay the joint military exercises, saying they would resume after the March 9–18 Paralympics. Referring to Pyongyang's willingness to speak to Seoul, he said: "I wouldn't read too much into it because we don't know if it's a genuine olive branch."

In part, Mattis's remarks are aimed at heading off any suggestion that the US accepted China's proposal of a halt to joint US-South Korean military exercises, in return for a North Korean freeze on missile and nuclear testing, as a means for starting negotiations. Mattis claimed that the postponement was for practical not political reasons, citing the importance of the Olympics to South Korea.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has backed Trump's militarist approach to North Korea, accused North Korea on Thursday of "unacceptable" provocations and vowed to strengthen Japan's military. Abe exploited the alleged North Korean threat to boost defence spending to a record level last month. He declared that "the security environment surrounding Japan is at its severest since World War II" and reiterated his intention to amend the constitution to lift restraints on the military.

The prospect of any significant breakthrough at Tuesday's meeting is slim. Even North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics is severely constrained by US and UN sanctions. Talks could break down quickly if North Korea attempts to send a blacklisted official to the meeting or the Olympics, or requests financial assistance to participate.

Yesterday President Moon declared he would take a tough line in talks and pledged to strengthen South Korea's military. Speaking to leaders of the conservative Korean Senior Citizens Association, he said: "I won't be weak-kneed or just focus on dialogue, as we did in the past. I will push for dialogue and pursue peace, but will do so based on a strong national defense capability."

At the same time, 28,500 US military personnel in South Korea remain on a high state of alert. Vincent Brooks, commander of US Forces Korea, stressed the importance of combat readiness and unity with US regional allies—South Korea and Japan in particular. American troops in South Korea operate on the basis of being ready to "Fight Tonight," a stance reinforced by major joint war games throughout 2016.

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