

South Korea delegation heads to Pyongyang for talks

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A South Korean delegation headed by two top security officials is due to arrive in Pyongyang today for high-level talks aimed at lowering acute tensions on the Korean Peninsula and paving the way for negotiations over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

A statement from the presidential Blue House in Seoul said National Security Office (NSO) head Chung Eui-yong and National Intelligence Service (NIS) chief Suh Hoon, would be part of a 10-person delegation. The presence of Chung and Suh suggests that South Korean officials want to put the issue of North Korea's denuclearisation on the agenda.

The presidential statement indicated that the delegation will attempt to arrange talks between North Korea and the United States despite the obstacles involved. The Trump administration has repeatedly insisted that the Pyongyang regime must take steps to denuclearise—that is, agree to US demands in advance—before any talks can proceed.

North Korea has emphatically ruled out any preconditions to talks with the US. The foreign ministry on Saturday condemned Washington's refusal to hold a dialogue with conditions as a "preposterous action."

"We have [the] intention to resolve issues in a diplomatic and peaceful way through dialogue and negotiation, but we will neither beg for dialogue nor evade the military option claimed by the US," Pyongyang declared, adding: "We have the full capability and will to confront any option favoured by the US."

While tensions on the Korean Peninsula eased temporarily during the Winter Olympics held in South Korea, Vice President Mike Pence and other US officials attending the sporting event deliberately snubbed members of the North Korean delegation. The

situation will quickly become tenser as the South Korean and US militaries hold major joint military exercises, starting early next month.

The annual drills, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, were delayed to enable a North Korean team to take part in the Olympics. They will involve hundreds of thousands of troops backed by US naval and air power. The war games are clearly aimed against the Pyongyang regime and are a rehearsal of military plans that include pre-emptive strikes against North Korea and "decapitation raids" to kill its top leaders.

In the past, North Korea has condemned the annual exercises as preparations to invade. On Saturday, its official KCNA news agency declared that the drills would harm reconciliation between the two Koreas.

"If the US finally holds joint exercises while keeping sanctions on the DPRK [North Korea], the DPRK will counter the US by its own mode of counteraction and the US will be made to own all responsibilities for the ensuring consequences," the KCNA commentary warned.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is walking a fine line in attempting to set up talks between the US and North Korea, without, at the same time, allowing Pyongyang to drive a wedge between South Korea and its military ally, the US.

Last Monday, during a meeting with Chinese Vice-Premier Liu Yandong, Moon said North Korea and the US had indicated their willingness to hold talks. He appealed for both sides to make concessions. "There is a need for the United States to lower the threshold for talks with North Korea and North Korea should show it is willing to denuclearise," he said.

Moon stressed the urgency, saying: "It is important the United States and North Korea sit down together quickly."

The Trump administration has issued bellicose threats to attack North Korea if it develops a nuclear missile capable of reaching continental America. CIA chief Mike Pompeo declared in January that North Korea was “a handful of months” away from crossing Washington’s red line.

South Korea’s envoys will travel to Washington following their trip to Pyongyang to brief top US officials on the talks. However, there is no sign that the White House is prepared to make any concessions to enable negotiations to go ahead. Last year, Trump publicly rebuked US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for “wasting his time” in seeking to set up talks with North Korea.

On February 24, Trump again insisted that discussions would take place only “under the right conditions, otherwise we’re not talking.” He warned that the US would move to “phase two,” which would be “very, very unfortunate for the world.” A few days later, Trump again threatened North Korea, saying: “We’re talking about tremendous potential loss of lives, numbers that nobody’s even contemplated, never thought of.”

Speaking at an annual Gridiron Dinner on Saturday, Trump joked about the possibility of talks with North Korea. “Now we’re talking. They, by the way, called up a couple of days ago, they said ‘we would like to talk’,” he declared facetiously during a rambling speech. “And I said, ‘so would we, but you have to denuke’.”

Trump’s frivolous attitude to talks with North Korea only underscores his administration’s aggressive and reckless policy that could, by his own admission, trigger a catastrophic war costing the lives of millions.

China has already reacted to the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula by reinforcing its military presence on its border with North Korea. In early February, the Chinese military test-fired its anti-missile system. Beijing is not concerned simply at the prospect of a flood of North Korean refugees, but the threat that the US and its allies would transform the country into an American client-state.

Speaking on Sunday ahead of the opening of China’s National People’s Congress this week, Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui appealed for talks between the US and North Korea. “War and chaos on the peninsula is not in the interests of any side,” he said.

Russia, which also borders North Korea and confronts the US and its proxies in Syria, has expressed deep concern. Asked about the danger of war, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointed out last week that the White House had clearly stated that “all options are on the table.” He warned that a conflict would be “a humanitarian disaster which could claim the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of civilians.”

In an ominous new development, prominent US newspapers are linking North Korea with the Syrian conflict, accusing Pyongyang, with any substantiation, of providing the Syrian military with chemical and other weapons. Linking North Korea with Syria, in order to provide another pretext for war against Pyongyang, only heightens the danger that other powers will be quickly dragged into a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.



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