

North Korea offers to enter talks to denuclearise

Peter Symonds
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In talks between top-level South Korean officials and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on Monday, North Korea reportedly indicated its readiness to engage in negotiations over denuclearisation and the termination of its nuclear weapons programs. The South Korean delegation was led by national security adviser Chung Eui-yong and intelligence chief Suh Hoon.

Chung told a media briefing in South Korea: “North Korea made clear its willingness to denuclearise the Korean peninsula and the fact there is no reason for it to have a nuclear program if military threats against the North are resolved and its regime is secure.” He said North Korea also agreed to suspend nuclear and missile testing while talks were underway.

Pyongyang’s call for a security guarantee is a longstanding demand that Washington has never been prepared to grant. Indeed, over the past year, the Trump administration has repeatedly made bellicose threats to destroy North Korea and has imposed crippling sanctions, both unilaterally and through the United Nations.

The US agreed to delay massive joint military exercises with South Korea during the Winter Olympics, to enable North Korean athletes and officials to attend the event. There is no sign that the Pentagon is going to put the war games, due to start next month, on hold again.

In fact, Washington has in the past dismissed the so-called freeze-for-freeze proposal by China and Russia—a halt to North Korean testing in return for a suspension of US drills in South Korea—as means of starting talks. The annual joint military exercises, which are rehearsals for war with North Korea, have always led to high tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

National security adviser Chung told the media that North Korean leader Kim had said he “could

understand” that the joint war games might start in April. “But he said he expected them to be readjusted if the situation on the Korean Peninsula stabilises in the future,” Chung said.

The meeting was the first time since 2007 that a South Korean delegation has travelled to Pyongyang for talks. South Korean President Moon Jae-in is planning a summit with Kim in the de-militarised zone that separates the two Koreas.

US President Donald Trump reacted positively to the announcement, but maintained Washington’s threats against North Korea. “Possible progress being made in talks with North Korea,” he tweeted yesterday morning. “For the first time in many years, a serious effort is being made by all parties concerned. The World is watching and waiting! May be false hope, but the US is ready to go hard in either direction!”

Speaking at a news conference later, Trump said he thought the North Korean offer was “sincere,” yet claimed that his administration’s campaign of “maximum pressure” on North Korea had brought about the change. Asked if he had any preconditions for talks, Trump said: “I don’t want to talk about it. We’re going to see what happens.”

However, a senior administration official speaking to CNN reiterated the Trump administration’s demand that North Korea take concrete steps to abandon its nuclear arsenal before the US would engage in direct talks. “All options are on the table and our posture toward the regime will not change until we see credible moves toward denuclearisation,” the official said.

Vice President Mike Pence, who attended the opening of Winter Olympics and deliberately snubbed North Korea officials, declared yesterday: “Whichever direction talks with North Korea go, we will be firm in our resolve. All options are on the table and our posture

toward the regime will not change until we see credible, verifiable and concrete steps toward denuclearisation.”

In other words, unless North Korea concedes to US demands and takes steps to denuclearise—in advance of any negotiations—Washington will maintain its punitive sanctions and continue to menace Pyongyang with total destruction. “All options” include a pre-emptive US military attack on North Korea with conventional and/or nuclear weapons.

While the US media and political establishment repeatedly accuses North Korea of “seeking to buy time” and a lack of good faith, Washington has a long track record of breaking promises. North Korea has twice entered into international agreements to abandon its nuclear weapons programs in exchange for assurances from the US, only to find that Washington failed to keep its end of the bargain.

The Clinton administration struck a deal with North Korea in 1994—the Agreed Framework—for Pyongyang to shut down its nuclear reactor and open up its facilities to international inspection. In return, the US pledged to provide North Korea with two power reactors and to normalise relations, enabling the small, economically backward country to seek foreign investment.

By the time Bill Clinton left office in 2000, however, the construction of the nuclear power reactors had barely started and relations with North Korea remained as before—the two countries are formally at war, having never signed a peace treaty after the 1950-53 Korean War. President George W. Bush rapidly overturned the Agreed Framework and in 2002 declared that North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, formed an “axis of evil.”

North Korea resumed its nuclear and missile program and exploded its first crude atomic bomb in 2006. Mired in its illegal military occupation in Iraq, the Bush administration turned to China to put pressure on North Korea and reached a deal in 2007 to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear facilities and allow UN inspections, in return for vague US promises to normalise relations. While Pyongyang kept its side of the deal, the Bush administration provocatively demanded more intrusive inspections, leading to a breakdown of the agreement.

The Trump administration’s own record demonstrates that it will not live up to international agreements. In January, Trump delivered an ultimatum

to the European powers to support US amendments to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran that places strict limits on Iranian nuclear programs. Speaking to the pro-Israeli lobby group AIPAC this week, Vice President Pence reiterated Trump’s threat to withdraw from the agreement unless the deal is fixed in line with US demands.

In announcing North Korea’s offer of talks, South Korean officials stressed that their discussions in Pyongyang were only preliminary. National intelligence chief Chung is due to head to Washington to brief the Trump administration on the substance of the meeting with Kim. North Korea is yet to make a formal statement about any talks with the US.



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