

US-North Korean talks still a tentative prospect

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10 March 2018

US President Donald Trump's abrupt about-face in accepting North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's invitation to a summit in May is a measure of the erratic and reckless character of his administration's foreign policy. Having spent his first year in office threatening North Korea with "total destruction," Trump has agreed to talks, although this prospect is still tentative.

Even if they proceed, the talks could break down rapidly, creating a more explosive situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Trump and his officials are vowing to maintain "maximum pressure" on North Korea, boasting that this has compelled the Pyongyang regime to discuss denuclearisation. The crippling US and international sanctions against North Korea remain in place, as does the threat of war, underscored by massive joint US-South Korean military exercises, involving hundreds of thousands of troops, that will begin next month.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said the Trump administration wants North Korea to take steps toward denuclearisation before any summit proceeds. "The president will not have the meeting without seeing concrete steps and concrete actions take place by North Korea, so the president is actually getting something," she insisted.

The basis of any summit remains unclear. South Korean officials who visited North Korea this week announced that Kim was willing to discuss denuclearisation in return for security guarantees from the US. At the same time, Kim reportedly agreed to freeze nuclear and missile testing, and turn a blind eye to joint war games in South Korea.

South Korean officials who flew to Washington to brief the Trump administration provided no further information as to what further concrete actions North

Korea might be prepared to take. North Korea is yet to issue an official statement confirming any details.

Speaking in Djibouti yesterday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that the briefing from the talks between the two Koreas was "the most forward-leaning report that we've had, in terms of Kim Jong-un's not just willingness, but his strong desire for talks." Tillerson added that Kim had changed his posture "in a fairly dramatic way" that came "as a little bit of a surprise to us as well."

At the same time, Tillerson attempted to draw a distinction between "talks" and "negotiations" with North Korea over its nuclear and missile programs. "You asked [about] negotiations and we're a long way from negotiations," he said. "I don't know yet, until we are able to meet ourselves face to face with representatives of North Korea, whether the conditions are right to even begin thinking about negotiations."

China welcomed the announcement of talks. Chinese President Xi Jinping, who spoke to Trump yesterday by phone, expressed the hope that "the United States and North Korea start contacts and dialogue as soon as possible and strive to reach positive results." South Korean President Moon Jae-in, through a spokesperson, optimistically declared that the summit would set the course for denuclearisation.

In the United States, however, Trump is under fire for conceding too much, just by offering to hold a summit with Kim. In the *Washington Post*, the militarist commentator Max Boot denounced Trump's "head-snapping display of incoherence." He declared that Trump had been snookered by North and South Korea into "a high-profile summit that is likely to end in disaster one way or another."

Boot claimed that, by agreeing to a summit with Kim, Trump had given the North Korean leader "what he

most wants: international legitimacy.”

Right-wing pundit Nicholas Kristof expressed a similar view in the *New York Times*, declaring “in exchange for nothing clear-cut,” Trump had agreed to give “North Korea what it has long craved: the respect and legitimacy that comes from the North Korean leader standing as an equal beside the American president.”

Other US politicians and analysts expressed considerable scepticism about the talks. Former Clinton administration Defence Secretary William Perry, who prepared the US for war with North Korea in 1994, asked the obvious question—“What does the US expect to get and what is the US willing to give in return?” He warned that without a good reason to talk “we are setting ourselves up for a major diplomatic failure.”

Democrat Senator Mark Warner, vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, declared that the Trump administration “must go into any meeting with a plan to ensure that negotiations with Kim Jong-un produce real results, not a photo op that lends legitimacy to North Korea’s murderous regime.”

In reality, Trump’s agreement to hold talks should be treated with far more scepticism than the offer made by North Korea. The US president last year publicly upbraided Tillerson for “wasting his time” in attempting to start talks with Pyongyang. While planning to meet with Kim, Trump has threatened to sabotage the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran if the agreement is not substantially amended in line with US demands.

While the American media routinely accuses North Korea of lacking good faith, the US did not keep its side of two agreements made with Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program—in 1994 and 2007. What North Korea has most wanted is not a photo op with a US president, but an end to decades of diplomatic and economic isolation, and security guarantees to stop the menacing US threats.

While giving lip service in the 1994 and 2007 agreements, Washington has never been prepared to normalise relations with North Korea. To do so would mean giving up the pretext—the supposed North Korean threat—that the US has used to justify its large military bases in South Korea, Japan and Guam, and its accelerating military build-up in the Asia Pacific, directed above all against China.

While US commentators speculate as to whether North Korea is playing Trump, it would be more legitimate to ask whether Trump is simply going through the motions of talking to Kim to provide the justification for a massive US attack on the Pyongyang regime.

Right-wing hawk John Bolton, former US ambassador to the UN, suggested as much in a tweet proposing that Trump use the summit to issue an ultimatum. It could be a brief meeting, Bolton declared, in which Trump said: “Tell me you have begun total denuclearisation, cause we’re not going to have protracted negotiations. You can tell me right now or we’ll start thinking of something else”—namely, war.



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