

North Korea suspends nuclear tests in latest concession to Trump

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North Korea announced yesterday it had suspended nuclear and long-range missile tests and plans to close its northern nuclear test site. It was the latest in a series of concessions offered by Pyongyang in the lead-up to a summit scheduled next Friday between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and a later summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump.

The official Korean Central News Agency quoted Kim as saying: “We no longer need any nuclear test or test launches of intermediate and intercontinental range ballistic missiles and because of this the northern nuclear test site has finished its mission.”

The agency said the country was making the shift to actively engage with regional neighbours and the international community to secure peace in the Korean Peninsula and create an “optimal international environment” to build its economy.

Trump immediately hailed the announcement as “very good news for North Korea and the World—big progress!” He tweeted: “Look forward to our Summit.” Despite the North Korean move, however, there is no guarantee that the Trump-Kim meeting, for which no date or location has been announced, will go ahead.

Only two days earlier, during a joint press conference with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Trump reiterated threats to walk away from a summit with Kim. While saying he hoped for a “great success,” the US president declared: “If I think that it’s a meeting that is not going to be fruitful we’re not going to go. If the meeting when I’m there is not fruitful I will respectfully leave the meeting.”

Yesterday, South Korean President Moon reported that Kim had also dropped the North’s demand that the US withdraw its 28,500 US troops from the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang has consistently cited the

presence of US troops as a justification for the development of a nuclear arsenal, but Washington and Seoul have always rejected their removal out of hand.

Moon made this statement as North and South Korea installed a telephone hotline between the two leaders. South Korea’s presidential office said a successful test call was conducted between Seoul’s presidential Blue House and Pyongyang’s State Affairs Commission.

On Tuesday, Trump said he had given his “blessing” to South Korea to discuss a peace treaty in the talks between Kim and Moon. For decades, the North Korean regime has sought a treaty to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War, together with security guarantees from Washington. Twice, in 1994 and 2007, denuclearisation deals were struck with the US, only to have Washington sabotage and ultimately renounce the deals.

By promoting the prospect of a deal, Trump may be calculating that he can transform North Korea from a US foe to a strategic partner or ally in Washington’s confrontation with China and Russia, both of which have borders with North Korea.

A gulf remains, however, between what the US and North Korea mean by denuclearisation. While Washington demands a total shutdown of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and an intrusive inspection regime, Pyongyang wants an end to the US nuclear deployments in South Korea, which include warships and strategic bombers.

Trump’s manoeuvres have also provoked intensive vying for position by the other major powers involved in the decades-old conflict over the Korean Peninsula, particularly China and Russia, as well as Japan and South Korea. He has set off alarm bells by holding out the prospect of reaching an accommodation with the North Korean regime, which is desperately seeking to

end punishing US-led economic sanctions and attract foreign investment via pro-market measures.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is preparing to visit Pyongyang “soon,” possibly after the planned Trump-Kim meeting, CNN reported Wednesday. It would be the Chinese leader’s first official visit to North Korea since he came to power in November 2012.

Xi’s trip would follow Kim’s first-ever visit to Beijing last month after a period of deteriorating relations, during which Kim purged several key officials with close ties to China, including his uncle Jang Song-thaek. Kim angered China by continuing missile and nuclear testing, giving the US a pretext to ramp up its provocative military activities in the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has also requested a summit with Kim. For now, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has accepted an invitation to visit Pyongyang, offered during North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho’s recent trip to Moscow, where Ri met with Putin.

While Kim is no doubt seeking to shore up relations with Beijing and Moscow as he prepares for negotiations with Trump, both China and Russia fear that the Trump administration is seeking to strengthen US imperialism’s position in North East Asia, at their direct expense.

Via trade war measures, Trump has rapidly escalated a US economic, diplomatic and military offensive against China, begun under Barack Obama, to combat Chinese influence and prepare for war. Under mounting pressure domestically, Trump has also stepped up the US confrontation with Russia, including by conducting missile strikes against Moscow’s ally, Syrian President Bashir al-Assad.

The Chinese and Russian responses came on top of Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s trip to Florida to meet with Trump. Tokyo is concerned that any US deal with North Korea would cut across their strategic and economic interests. Abe had strongly backed Trump’s rejection of any talks with Pyongyang, and was exploiting the North Korean missile tests to push ahead with moves to remilitarise Japan.

The summit between North Korean leader Kim and South Korean President Moon is slated to take place this coming Friday in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas. Ahead of the meeting, Kim and Moon will have their first direct contact via the

new hotline. No doubt the outcome will be watched closely as an indicator of what to expect at a meeting between Kim and Trump.

Such are the geo-political tensions and instability in Asia and the world that it is difficult to determine in advance whether a Trump-Kim summit, if it takes place at all, will produce a deal, or function as a new provocation that leads to war. Any agreement, however, is likely to compound, not lessen, tensions and pave the way for confrontation and conflict, if not immediately in Asia, then elsewhere.



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