

North and South Korea hold “peace” summit

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North Korean head Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, along with senior ministers, are meeting today in the “Peace House” building that sits astride the border that has divided the peninsula since an armistice ended the Korean War in 1953.

The highly-choreographed event, much of which is being broadcast live across South Korea, has been prepared well in advance. It is taking place on the US demand that North Korea agree to “denuclearisation,” or the dismantling of its small arsenal of nuclear weapons. The two leaders are also discussing a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War and the improvement of South-North economic relations.

The North Korean regime has announced the “suspension” of nuclear and missile testing, but given no indication whether it will agree to “denuclearisation.” If it does, it will most likely insist on a process that takes place over a protracted period.

The Trump administration has claimed that the talks are the outcome of the bellicose stance it has taken toward North Korea, including Trump’s threats to destroy the country with “fire and fury” and harsh economic sanctions. Reports indicate that China’s collaboration in imposing the sanctions has severely affected the North Korean economy, collapsing its exports by over 90 percent and worsening the acute social crisis afflicting its 25 million people.

On the proviso that today’s meeting results in steps toward North Korea’s “denuclearisation,” Trump has indicated that he will meet with Kim in May or June. Incoming secretary of state and current CIA director Mike Pompeo made a secret trip to North Korea over Easter for preliminary discussions. After revealing Pompeo’s visit, Trump continued to boast about the possibility of a deal. This suggests that the North Korean regime has agreed in principle to meet the terms dictated by Washington.

Moon’s administration exploited today’s event to the

hilt, promoting itself as the government that is delivering South Korea from the danger of a catastrophic war and advancing the cause of Korean reunification.

Kim Jong-un is playing his specified role in the diplomatic pantomime, vowing his regime’s commitment to peace and goodwill on the Korean Peninsula and posing as required for the media. In exchange, Washington and Seoul will have to give the North Korean ruling clique and military apparatus an assurance that it can remain in power and retain its wealth and privileges. However, similar assurances by US imperialism have been cast aside on more than one occasion in the past.

Any concrete development toward a rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula on US-dictated terms will be viewed with immense concern in Beijing. Formally, North Korea is a Chinese ally. Since 1953, it has functioned as a militarised buffer between China’s northern borders and the substantial US forces based in South Korea and Japan.

The decades-long objective of major factions of both the American and South Korean ruling classes has been to incorporate North Korea into the US sphere of influence. Since the early 1990s, the tactical conflicts in Washington have centred on whether that aim should be achieved through war and regime-change or a deal with the existing ruling clique.

The worst scenario for Beijing would be if the North Korean regime performed a diplomatic somersault and, in exchange for self-preservation and substantial financial rewards, transformed itself into a garrison state serving American and South Korean interests.

While it is far too early to draw any definitive conclusions, the possibility of such an outcome cannot be excluded. US imperialism is seeking to dramatically undermine China’s strategic and military position. It does not have—and never has—any genuine concern

about human rights in North Korea. Its only real worry is that Pyongyang's possession of a small nuclear arsenal has vastly complicated the use of force to bring North Korea under US sway.

The South Korean capitalist class talks continually about reunification, but what the dominant factions have in mind is the 1990s "Sunshine Policy." The North Korean dictatorship would remain intact, but open up much of the north to transnational investment and exploitation. The border would remain sealed to the vast mass of North Koreans, who would be offered up as brutally repressed cheap labour for corporations from South Korea and elsewhere.

The South Korean working class would pay the price in the form of job destruction or demands to accept cuts to their wages and working conditions to remain "competitive" against northern workers.

Of greatest concern to Beijing is that such a "reunification" could lead to the North Korean regime essentially being incorporated into the US-South Korea alliance. Any guarantee by Washington that its military forces would not move north would be worthless under conditions of rising strategic and economic competition and conflict. The American ruling elite would potentially even accept North Korea keeping some of its nuclear weapons if its missiles were aimed in the direction of China.

The main consequence of any US rapprochement with Pyongyang will be to bring great power rivalries to the fore. Russia, which shares a border with North Korea, would be just as alarmed as China at such developments. It can be safely assumed that Beijing and Moscow are both carrying out intrigues with factions of the North Korean regime to try to protect their interests.

The other power that views the current events as a setback is Japan. The Japanese ruling class has utilised the purported threat from North Korea as the primary pretext for its systematic campaign to bolster its military force and remove constitutional limitations on their use. The Trump administration blindsided Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government with its shift from military threats to a diplomatic embrace of Kim.

US imperialism's preparations for sharper tensions in North East Asia are reflected in the Trump administration's decision to nominate Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of US Pacific Command

(PACOM), as its ambassador to South Korea. Harris had been nominated as the US ambassador to Australia and was expected to be confirmed in that position this week. Instead, Pompeo reportedly petitioned Trump to have the admiral's assignment shifted to the more strategically significant post in Seoul.

Harris has been among the most outspoken anti-China figures in the US military. His mission will be to shore up the resolve of the South Korean government and armed forces if the talks with North Korea break down and the Trump administration lurches back to a policy of war.

If relations proceed to a Trump-Kim summit and further agreements, Harris will be at the centre of ongoing talks with Pyongyang and the efforts to enlist North Korea into the US confrontation with China.

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