

Trump lauds “declaration for peace” on Korean Peninsula

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The choreographed talks Friday between North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in concluded with the publication of a joint “declaration for peace, prosperity and unification of the Korean Peninsula.”

The document outlined agreements to cease “hostile acts” against one another and ease “military tension;” implement family reunions and cultural exchanges; restore rail and road links; pursue a treaty to formally end the 1950–53 Korean War; and, most carefully worded, achieve “through complete denuclearisation, a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.”

The talks were spurred by the threats of the Trump administration to “totally destroy” North Korea, combined with harsh sanctions that have further crippled the country’s already crisis-stricken economy. The military regime headed by Kim Jong-un is seeking an accommodation with US imperialism that guarantees its survival and protects the wealth and privilege of the ruling clique in Pyongyang. The South Korean capitalist class likewise want an arrangement that avoids a catastrophic war on the peninsula and opens-up, for investment and exploitation, North Korea’s resources, cheap labour and transport routes.

The content of yesterday’s declaration would almost certainly have been vetted by Mike Pompeo, now Trump’s secretary of state, during his secret visit to North Korea over Easter. Its most significant clause stated: “South and North Korea shared the view that the measures being initiated by North Korea are very *meaningful* and crucial for the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula...”

The condition placed by the Trump administration for a meeting between Trump and Kim Jong-un was “meaningful” steps by North Korea toward “complete, verifiable denuclearisation.” Thus far, what the

Pyongyang regime has announced is the suspension of any further nuclear and long-range missile tests. It did so, however, on the grounds that tests were no longer needed as its nuclear-armed missiles are now operational. It has made no commitment to dismantle its small nuclear arsenal or allow international inspectors to have access to its military and scientific facilities.

Nevertheless, the Korea talks and the language of the declaration have been followed by statements by Trump and Pompeo indicating that planning for a Trump-Kim summit will proceed. Trump hailed the declaration in typically inane fashion, with a tweet proclaiming “KOREAN WAR TO END!”

The political shift in barely two months—from ominous threats of a massive US military assault on North Korea to the Korean leaders holding hands and hugging each other—is a measure of the volatility produced by growing US-China tensions.

For Beijing, the highly militarised state in North Korea serves definite purposes. Since 1953, it has functioned as a buffer between China’s northern borders and the US forces in South Korea and Japan, while permanently threatening them as well.

The overriding objective of US imperialism is to undermine the strategic and military position of China, which was labeled in the January 2018 National Security Strategy document as Washington’s main global “great power” competitor. The ambition of successive administrations has been, whether by war or by a settlement with the regime, to draw North Korea into the US sphere of influence.

Since 2009, North Korea’s nuclear tests and development of a small arsenal of nuclear weapons have provided the pretext for the ramping up of pressure on Pyongyang and the boosting of US military

forces in the region. The US has deployed some of its most sophisticated aircraft and advanced anti-missile systems in South Korea and Japan, which are primarily intended for use in a war with China. The “threat” posed by North Korea has also been used in Japan to justify major increases in military spending and moves to repudiate constitutional obstacles to the Japanese government deploying its armed forces in theatres of war.

The escalation of rhetoric and sanctions against North Korea under the Trump administration has been a component of its broader escalation of tensions with China, which includes moves toward open trade war and renewed challenges to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Within that context, China has, for its own reasons, applied its own pressure on North Korea to cease its nuclear and missile testing and bow to the demand for denuclearisation. It has enforced the sanctions, causing a collapse of North Korean exports. As a result, an open rift has developed between Beijing and Pyongyang.

The outcome of North Korea’s turn to diplomatic talks with South Korea and the US is highly uncertain. There is no question that Kim Jong-un’s regime will be coming under considerable pressure from Beijing not to make agreements that are detrimental to Chinese strategic interests. At the same time, the North Korean ruling elite is being offered a way to ensure its survival and gain access to large-scale investment and financial pay-offs by the South Korean capitalist class, providing it meets US demands.

“Reunification” does not mean the abolition of the border between the north and the south. The so-called “Sunshine Policy” formulated in South Korea during the 1990s was a variant of China’s “one country, two systems” model. The North Korean police state would remain intact to repress the North Korean working class, which would be blocked from going south and made available to South Korean corporations as cheap labour. North Korea’s military apparatus would be incorporated into the US-South Korea alliance and redirected to threaten China’s northern border.

One aspect of the Korean declaration that would have raised alarm in Beijing is the wording of a section on the signing of a formal peace treaty. It stated that the Koreas would actively pursue a meeting with the US toward such an eventuality, *or*, a meeting with both the

US and China. In other words, a signal was sent by Pyongyang that a deal could be made without Chinese involvement.

The greatest issue standing in the way of moves toward such a rapprochement is North Korea’s nuclear arsenal. The Trump administration has staked its domestic credibility on its claim that it will extract an agreement from Pyongyang to dismantle it. While a process of “denuclearisation” could be extended over many years, some form of arrangement has been set by the US as the precondition for peace.

During a joint press conference yesterday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Trump asserted: “We will not repeat the mistakes of past administrations. Maximum pressure will continue until denuclearisation occurs.” On several occasions over recent weeks, Trump has declared that the US will “walk out” of talks with North Korea if its demands are not met.

In an open hint that his administration could lurch back to his threat to “totally destroy” North Korea, Trump told the press conference: “We’re setting up meetings now. I have a responsibility to see if I can do it [denuclearisation]. If I can’t, it’ll be a very tough time for a lot of countries and a lot of people.”



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