

North Korea releases American prisoners ahead of summit with Trump

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The North Korean regime headed by Kim Jong-un handed over three American prisoners to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the conclusion of talks in Pyongyang yesterday, as a sign of “good faith” ahead of talks with President Donald Trump. Trump hailed the prisoner release as another step forward in his administration’s push to bring North Korea under US influence and transform the balance of forces in East Asia to the strategic and military detriment of China.

The three prisoners, all Americans of Korean background, were arrested in North Korea on allegations of espionage. Kim Dong-chol, a Christian missionary in his 60s, was arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 10 years hard labour in a typical North Korean show trial. Tony Kim, who was working at the privately-operated, largely Christian-funded Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), was arrested in April 2017. Kim Hak-song, another Christian missionary who claimed he intended to establish an experimental farm at PUST, was arrested in May 2017. Pompeo reported that the men are in reasonable health.

According to a tweet sent by Trump, Pompeo and Kim Jong-un agreed on a still undisclosed date and venue for a meeting of the US and North Korean leaders. The talks will most likely take place next month at the “Peace House” building on the North-South Korean border, where Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in held a summit on April 27.

The two Koreas signed a declaration committing to cultural and economic cooperation; the signing of a formal peace treaty to end the 1950-53 Korean War; and, “through complete denuclearisation, a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.”

Ahead of talks with Kim, the Trump administration has set out the US terms for a rapprochement with

North Korea. They are, in Pompeo’s words, the “permanent, verifiable, irreversible dismantling of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction program ... without delay.”

Ostensibly, this would involve North Korea shutting down its reactors, which are capable of producing weapons’ grade material, and handing over to US agencies its small arsenal of nuclear warheads. North Korea is believed to have dozens of facilities connected with the nuclear and missile programs. Hundreds of US or United Nations inspectors would have to be inserted into the country to carry out “verification.”

North Korea been brought to the brink of economic collapse by sanctions, above all because China, for its own reasons, has assisted the US to enforce them. The Pyongyang regime is signalling that it is prepared to submit to Washington’s demands in exchange for guarantees that its corrupt ruling clique remains in power and its wealth is protected. It is indicating, however, that it will propose a timeframe for so-called denuclearisation that stretches out over a protracted period, even decades.

North Korea also wants a formal peace treaty with the United States and some form of guarantee that it will not be subjected to future aggression. The ruling clique in Pyongyang will most likely ask for substantial financial pay-offs from South Korea in exchange for opening up North Korea to investment and offering up the North Korean working class as a brutally repressed source of cheap labour for transnational corporations.

Beijing is stepping up its diplomatic efforts to pressure Pyongyang not to make any concessions to Washington that undermine Chinese interests. While formally endorsing the proposed talks, it recognises that behind the moves by US imperialism toward a rapprochement with North Korea is its broader strategy

of preventing China from developing as a rival centre of global economic and military power.

The day before meeting with Pompeo, Kim Jong-un was flown to the northern Chinese city of Dalian for talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping—his second meeting with Xi in two months.

A particular concern of China is the THAAD missile defence systems that the US has deployed in Japan and South Korea on the pretext of providing protection against North Korean attacks. In reality, the THAAD batteries are part of the US preparations for a potential nuclear war with China. In the event of a US “first strike,” the anti-missile systems are intended to shoot down any nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) launched in retaliation by the Chinese military.

There is little doubt that Beijing will have sought to pressure Pyongyang to make the removal of the THAAD system one of the conditions for any agreement over “denuclearisation.”

Kim’s statements in Dalian were markedly at odds with the Trump administration’s rhetoric about a rapid dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear weapons’ capabilities. He referred instead to a “*step-by-step and synchronised* measures” that “will *ultimately* realise denuclearisation and lasting peace on the peninsula.” [emphasis added]

Historically, North Korea has defined “denuclearisation” as meaning the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea and the end of the US-South Korean military alliance.

Russia, which also borders North Korea, is seeking to influence the outcome of talks with the US as well. Its foreign minister Sergei Lavrov is expected to visit Pyongyang before any summit between Trump and Kim. Moscow has formally indicated that any agreement on the Korean peninsula must be made through the “six party” talks that involve China, Russia and Japan, as well as the US and North and South Korea.

The meeting between Trump and Kim could quickly break down. To a great extent, Trump has staked the domestic credibility of his already besieged administration on North Korea submitting to a rapid “denuclearisation.”

The North Korean state media has condemned the Trump administration’s public boasting that

Pyongyang was pressured into the talks by sanctions and American “strength.” A Korean Central News Agency editorial asserted that the agreement to hold talks was an “expression of self-confidence as it [North Korea] has acquired everything it desires.”

This week’s Trump administration decision to renege on the 2015 agreement with Iran has only heightened the prospect that the US-North Korea talks will collapse into mutual recriminations.

The North Korean regime has no reason to believe that any pact it makes with Trump will be honoured by the current or future administrations. As the WSWS Perspective noted yesterday: “If and when US strategic priorities change, or circumstances allow, Washington will invoke the most flimsy and contrived pretext to jettison a Korean denuclearisation agreement.”

If Pyongyang, with the tacit backing of both China and Russia, refuses to submit to US dictates, the prospect of war on the Korean peninsula will re-emerge with renewed intensity.



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