US cancels military drills, but maintains sanctions on North Korea

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The US and South Korea formally announced on Tuesday that large-scale joint military exercises in August would be cancelled in order to maintain the momentum of talks with North Korea over denuclearisation.

Following his summit meeting in Singapore with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last week, US President Donald Trump indicated that joint US-South Korean drills—barely disguised rehearsals for war with North Korea—would be suspended as long as negotiations with Pyongyang continued.

Last year's Ulchi Freedom Guardian war games ran for 11 days in August, involving 17,500 US troops and 50,000 South Korean troops, along with military personnel from Australia, Britain and Canada. The drills are part of a broader program of exercises to ensure that South Korean and US forces are prepared to "fight tonight" to implement battle plans that include pre-emptive strikes against North Korea.

Trump tweeted on Sunday that the war games were both "very expensive" and "quite provocative." He also said the military exercises would be quickly restarted if North Korea failed to meet US demands, tweeting: "[They] can start up immediately if talks break down, which I hope will not happen."

Trump's announcement caught US allies, South Korea and Japan, off guard. While calling off the exercises was presented as a joint decision, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha acknowledged during a press conference yesterday that Seoul was not informed in advance.

Kang told the media that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had informed her of US plans for North Korea's denuclearisation, but she provided no details. Beyond a vague joint statement at the Singapore summit, nothing has been made public about what was decided between Trump and Kim.

The commitment to "denuclearisation" is interpreted differently—with Washington insisting on the dismantling of North Korean nuclear weapons and facilities, and Pyongyang likely to push for the removal of nuclear-capable US forces from South Korea.

Tokyo and Seoul are both concerned that the US will strike a deal with North Korea to dismantle long-range nuclear missiles but allow it to maintain medium-range nuclear weapons capable of striking Japan and South Korea. Japan's chief government spokesman Yoshihide Suga hinted that Tokyo could open up its own talks with Pyongyang, saying: "We should have a summit meeting [with North Korea] to resolve our mutual issues."

Far from ending the danger of war in North East Asia, the Trump administration's moves to strike a deal with North Korea are part of broader US preparations for trade war and war with China. Washington is aiming to further isolate Beijing by drawing Pyongyang into the US sphere of influence. The strategy, however, is fraught with contradictions, as the US has relied on China to place enormous economic pressure on North Korea.

For its part, North Korea is involved in a precarious balancing act between China and the US. It is seeking a deal with Washington that will end its economic and diplomatic isolation, as well as the threat of a US military attack, while maintaining ties with Beijing, its formal ally and major trading partner.

North Korean leader Kim headed to Beijing this week for two days of meetings with Chinese leaders. Kim, who came to power in 2011, only visited China for the first time in March, in a bid to thaw relations before talks with the US. Ties between the countries had been badly strained by North Korea's ongoing nuclear

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program on the one hand, and China's imposition of tough UN sanctions on North Korea on the other.

The Chinese media prominently featured Kim's visit and meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, suggesting that relations between the two countries had been mended. China has opposed North Korea's nuclear program because it provides a pretext for US military forces in South Korea and Japan, and could spark a nuclear arms race in North East Asia. At the same time, Beijing has been reluctant to create an economic and political crisis in Pyongyang that Washington might exploit to affect a regime-change.

Kim is clearly seeking China's economic assistance. He visited the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Beijing Infrastructure Investment Company. This indicates that North Korea is looking for help in agriculture and involvement in China's massive "One Belt, One Road" project to build infrastructure across the Eurasian landmass. Kim's visit was preceded by a trip last month by North Korean provincial governors to China to foster economic cooperation.

Above all, Kim is looking for an easing of crippling economic sanctions that have hit most North Korean exports and many imports. The Trump administration has declared there will be no sanctions relief until the process of denuclearisation is complete. While an end to decades of diplomatic and economic isolation by the US is important to North Korea, the vast bulk of its trade has been with China.

Confronted with escalating US trade war measures, China could decide to retaliate, not only economically but politically by softening sanctions on North Korea. Indicating that Washington is aware of the danger, US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert warned against linking disagreements with China over trade to its cooperation with the US over North Korea.

The Trump administration's decision to call off the military exercises may have been a small concession not only to North Korea, but also to China. CNN reported that President Xi had heavily pushed for the suspension of the drills in a number of direct conversations with Trump before the Singapore summit.

Nevertheless, escalating trade tensions could prompt Beijing to ease its sanctions on Pyongyang. Former US State Department official Mintaro Oba told CNN: "If the Trump administration continues to escalate the fight on trade so far that relations sour in a major way, it's possible the Chinese will feel less and less inclined to cooperate on enforcing and generating pressure on the North Korean regime."

More than a fortnight after the Singapore summit, there are no signs that any agreement has been reached on the terms, scope and timing of "denuclearisation." US Defence Secretary James Mattis told the media yesterday he was "not aware" of any steps taken by North Korea to wind back its nuclear programs. "The detailed negotiations have not begun. I would not expect that at this point," he added.

The fundamental stance of the US toward North Korea has not changed. The tentative moves to end the dangerous confrontation on the Korean Peninsula could rapidly fall apart if North Korea fails to meet US demands, not only to abandon its nuclear arsenal, but to fall into line with American foreign policy.

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