

US-North Korean nuclear deal stalls amid growing recriminations

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The US and North Korea this week traded accusations in a further indication that the nuclear deal struck between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June is stalling.

In a brief joint statement, the two leaders had publicly committed to the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. But the gulf between the two sides has become increasingly apparent over the past two months.

Washington has interpreted the agreement as North Korea dismantling its nuclear and missile programs, giving up its nuclear arsenal and allowing intrusive inspections. Pyongyang has insisted that the US make step-by-step concessions, including easing sanctions and taking steps toward a formal peace treaty.

The tensions were evident last month when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Pyongyang for negotiations. Following his departure, the North Korean foreign ministry issued a blunt statement denouncing Washington's "unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearisation" and warning that trust between the two sides was now at a "dangerous" stage.

The Vox website this week revealed that the Trump administration has demanded that Pyongyang hand over 60 to 70 percent of its nuclear warheads within six to eight months, either to the US or a third country. It is not known whether the US has offered anything in exchange. The website reported that North Korean negotiators had rejected the proposal multiple times over the past two months.

Pompeo and his North Korean counterpart Ri Yong Ho shook hands during a brief encounter last weekend at a regional security forum in Singapore. However, Pompeo then suggested that North Korea's continued work on nuclear programs was inconsistent with its

pledge to denuclearise.

Ri responded by declaring that North Korea had already made goodwill gestures, including a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, and the dismantling of a testing site. Instead of responding in kind, he said, the US "is raising its voice louder for maintaining the sanctions" and is retreating "even from declaring the end of the war, a very basic and primary step for providing peace on the Korean peninsula."

Rather pointedly, Ri flew to Iran this week where he met with President Hassan Rouhani, who told him that the performance of the US administration "has led the country to be considered untrustworthy and unreliable around the world." The Trump administration has unilaterally abrogated the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed sanctions, despite Tehran abiding by its terms.

Formally the US and North Korea are still at war, as a peace treaty was never signed to end the devastating 1950–53 Korean War. Washington has maintained a de facto diplomatic and economic blockade of North Korea for decades, which has been ramped up under the Obama and Trump administrations, with harsh economic sanctions designed to provoke a severe crisis in Pyongyang.

In comments on Fox News on Tuesday, Trump's national security adviser John Bolton escalated the war of words. He accused North Korea of failing to live up to the agreement reached in Singapore in June. "What we need is performance from North Korea on denuclearisation," he said. "North Korea has not taken the steps we feel are necessary to denuclearise."

Bolton flatly rejected North Korea's call for a step-by-step easing of sanctions, saying they would not be lifted until North Korea abandoned its nuclear programs. "The idea that we're going to relax the sanctions just

on North Korea's say-so is something that isn't under consideration. We're going to continue to apply maximum pressure to North Korea until they denuclearise," he declared.

Prior to being appointed as national security adviser, Bolton, who is notorious for his militarist views, publicly opposed talks with North Korea and urged military attacks on the small, impoverished country. Trump, who last year threatened to "completely destroy" North Korea, has not publicly disavowed repeated statements that "all options are on the table"—including war on the Pyongyang regime.

Bolton even sounded a sour note on the North Korean handover last month of the remains of US soldiers killed in the Korean War—a step for which Trump thanked North Korea. Bolton declared that North Korea was not serious about improving relations with the West, as it had not handed over the remains of soldiers of other combatant countries, such as South Korea and Australia.

Responding on Thursday, Pyongyang reiterated its demand for the US to agree to declare a formal end to the 1950–53 war, as the first part of the US providing a security guarantee to North Korea. The North Korean foreign ministry said "some high-level officials within the US administration are making baseless allegations against us and making desperate attempts at intensifying the international sanctions and pressure."

Far from even a token easing of sanctions, the US has taken steps to tighten them.

On August 3, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on a Russian bank that the US claims was still doing business with North Korea, in supposed violation of existing measures.

Last weekend, Pompeo also suggested that Russia was breaching UN sanctions by issuing work visas to North Korean workers. "I want to remind every nation that has supported these resolutions that this is a serious issue and something that we will discuss with Moscow," he said. Russia denied a *Wall Street Journal* story that it was allowing thousands of new North Korean labourers into the country.

While accusing North Korea of not living up to agreements, the US has no intention of making any concessions without a complete capitulation by Pyongyang to its demands. The US is not just seeking the destruction of North Korea's nuclear weapons and

programs, but is pushing for Pyongyang to align itself more closely with Washington in foreign policy. A deal with North Korea is part of a far broader US strategy aimed at encircling China and preparing for war.

For the time being, Trump has halted his inflammatory and provocative threats against North Korea. But that could rapidly change if North Korea fails to bow to US demands.



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