

Seoul and Pyongyang prepare for September summit while US intensifies campaign against North Korea

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North and South Korea held high-level talks on Monday in preparation for a third summit between the North's chairman, Kim Jong-un, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in next month in Pyongyang. A specific date has not yet been announced, but the meeting will most likely take place in mid- or late-September.

Moon will be only the third sitting South Korean leader to make such a trip. Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun each visited Pyongyang in 2000 and 2007 respectively.

Moon hailed the future summit and the further development of North-South relations during Wednesday's Liberation Day speech, which marks the end of Japanese rule in 1945. "Even though a political unification may be a long way from here, establishing peace between the South and the North and freely visiting each other, and forming a joint economic community is true liberation to us," he claimed.

The "peace" and "liberation" Moon is offering for the Korean Peninsula is far different from what many in the South have imagined. It does not include an end to the division of Korea, allowing workers and farmers to travel unrestricted across the current border, for families to reunite, and for people to visit their ancestral homes. Instead, Seoul is advocating the maintenance of the two states and the continuation of the Stalinist police-state regime in the North. Under the proposed arrangement, Kim Jong-un and the ruling clique in Pyongyang would serve as highly paid compradors, enforcing the brutal exploitation of North Korean workers for South Korean and transnational corporations.

Moon called for the establishment of special

economic zones in Gyeonggi and Gangwon Provinces along the border, which would exploit cheap North Korean labor and lead to the suppression of South Korean wages in the name of remaining "competitive."

Moon also stated that the two sides would begin to link up roads and railways by the end of the year and proposed building a new "East Asia Railroad Community" connecting the two Koreas, Japan, China, Russia, Mongolia, and the United States.

The South Korean president made sure to show that he was not departing from the line of the Trump administration, which has insisted there will be not be any lifting of harsh economic sanctions on North Korea until it dismantles its nuclear weapons' program. Echoing Washington, Moon declared: "Economic cooperation can really take off when peace is established on the Korean Peninsula, along with its complete denuclearization."

Despite Moon's assurances, the *Economist* this week expressed broader concerns in US strategic circles that South Korea is pursuing its own agenda. It wrote: "[Moon's] promise on August 15th of road and railway links with North Korea speaks to his hopes of shared prosperity. But it generated unease in Washington. South Korean and American interests are undoubtedly diverging. Before long, Mr. Trump might interpret that as a personal betrayal by Mr. Moon—with unpredictable consequences."

Both sides have downplayed any sort of rift. During a phone discussion following Monday's meeting, South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha (Gang Gyeong-hwa) spoke with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and re-affirmed the two governments' alliance, while calling for continued "denuclearization

efforts and the need to maintain pressure until we achieve the final, fully verified denuclearization of the DPRK as agreed by Chairman Kim.”

While the differences between Washington and Seoul may not be expressed publicly, the Moon administration is still working to carry out its own economic strategy by attempting to play the role of mediator between North Korea and the US. Yet the Trump administration in Washington has a far different agenda in mind. Trump’s “peace” overtures towards North Korea this summer were, in fact, an ultimatum: flip into an alignment with the US against China or be annihilated.

Washington, as it escalates its economic and military confrontation with China, is continuing to ramp up pressure throughout the region. On Wednesday, Washington placed additional sanctions on companies in China, Russia and Singapore for supposedly doing business with North Korea. US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin stated that Washington “will continue to implement existing sanctions on North Korea” and that “consequences for violating these sanctions will remain in place until we have achieved the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea.”

Washington though had only warm words for South Korea, calling it “a faithful and reliable partner in the maritime implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions,” despite three firms being discovered to have imported North Korean coal on at least seven occasions last year. UN sanctions bar the North from exporting coal.

North Korea responded this week by denouncing the existing sanctions, particularly their impact on cross-border relations. *Rodong Sinmun*, the official organ of the North’s ruling party, stated: “If the (South) joins and blindly follows sanctions pressure by foreign forces maneuvering to deter inter-Korean exchanges, the North-South relations cannot be advanced in the interests of the Korean people and the implementation of the Panmunjom Declaration cannot be pushed,”

Pyongyang is demanding a formal declaration ending the 1950–1953 Korean War before giving up its small arsenal of nuclear weapons. The regime is well aware that it cannot trust Washington’s word, having seen Trump tear up the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the US bomb countries like Libya that gave up their nuclear programs.

Without North Korea’s complete subjugation, however, a declaration ending the Korean War would cut across Washington’s primary objective, which is to undermine China’s strategic and military interests. Joseph Yun, a former leading US State Department diplomat on North Korea, told the *New York Times*: “For the United States, an end-of-war declaration or a peace declaration or a peace treaty has always had a broader context.”

US ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris stated that it was “too early” for such a declaration. The standoff between Pyongyang and Washington continues, with the potential for the Trump administration to return to its threat to “totally destroy” North Korea if it does not bow down to US dictates.



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