

Trump backs talks with North Korea despite nuclear stalemate

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The Trump administration is increasingly coming under criticism over the lack of any progress in talks with North Korea over denuclearisation following President Donald Trump's summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June.

A *New York Times* editorial on Monday derided Trump's claims to have resolved the North Korean crisis as “the boasts of a man with little grasp of the complexity and difficulty of an issue that has long defied resolution.” It said negotiations over the elimination of North Korea's nuclear missiles had “stalemated” and Pyongyang continued to produce nuclear fuel and missiles.

In a report issued on Monday, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said North Korea continued to develop its nuclear program in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. It declared that such activities were “deeply regrettable” and “a cause of grave concern.”

The fact that North Korea is proceeding with its nuclear program is hardly a surprise. The joint statement released from the Trump-Kim summit spoke only in general terms of the need “to work toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula”—a vague phrase that Washington and Pyongyang interpreted differently.

North Korea has insisted that any moves toward denuclearisation on its part must be on a step-by-step basis in return for concessions from the US and its allies. Above all, Pyongyang is seeking an easing of crippling economic sanctions imposed unilaterally by the US and through the UN, as well as a formal peace treaty to end to its decades of isolation following the 1950–53 Korean War.

As a show of good faith, North Korea has suspended all nuclear and missile testing and taken limited steps to

dismantle some testing facilities. In return, the US has done very little—calling a halt to joint military exercises with South Korea, which, as Trump emphasised, could be quickly reversed.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has held three rounds of talks with the Pyongyang regime and a fourth is reportedly in preparation. However, the gulf between the two sides was underscored by the North Korean reaction to his visit last month. It denounced Washington's “gangster” demands—presumably for North Korea to unilaterally dismantle its nuclear arsenal. The Trump administration has repeatedly insisted that sanctions will be lifted only after North Korea has denuclearised.

In comments cited by the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday, Moon Chung-in, special adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, said US-North Korean talks had stalled and Seoul was attempting to encourage mutual concessions to build trust. The problem, he said, was that “the US is demanding North Korea front-load vows to declare and accept inspections of its nuclear arms” before any easing of sanctions.

President Moon is due to hold a third summit with Kim next month. He has supported calls by Pyongyang for a declaration formally ending the Korean War as the prelude to negotiations over a peace treaty. The fighting concluded in 1953 with an armistice, which meant that the US and its allies technically remained at war with North Korea. To date, Washington has not agreed to such a declaration.

Despite the obvious stalemate in talks, the Trump administration has remained unusually restrained in its approach. Trump's national security adviser John Bolton, who has a history of demanding US military action against North Korea to destroy its nuclear arsenal, mildly stated last Sunday on ABC's “This

Week” that Pyongyang had to “demonstrate seriousness” on denuclearisation.

In an interview with Reuters on Monday, Trump suggested that he would hold another summit with Kim later in the year and boasted of the success of the Singapore meeting. “I stopped [North Korea’s] nuclear testing. I stopped missile testing. Japan is thrilled. What’s going to happen? Who knows? We’re going to see,” he said

Less than a year ago, Trump warned in the United Nations that he would “totally destroy” North Korea if it threatened the United States. Now, he is bragging about his “great chemistry” with the North Korean leader. “There’s no ballistic missiles going up, there’s a lot of silence... I have very good personal relations with Chairman Kim, and I think that’s what holds it together,” he told Reuters.

The abrupt about-face underscores the fact that the alleged threat posed by North Korea’s limited nuclear arsenal was never Washington’s primary concern. Rather the aim of the intense US pressure on Pyongyang, including the threat of all-out war, was to shift the orientation of the regime from Beijing to Washington, as part of broader US efforts to isolate, encircle and undermine China.

Trump has built on the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which strengthened US alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific and expanded American military forces throughout the region in preparation for a war with China. Amid its historic decline, US imperialism regards China as the chief threat to its global dominance. Trump is in the midst of escalating trade war measures against China, with threats of more to come.

That Trump is talking up his good relations with Kim and is in no rush to press for North Korea’s denuclearisation suggests that the two leaders reached an understanding in Singapore to collaborate more closely on a range of issues, including against China. Relations between North Korea and China, which are nominally allies, markedly deteriorated after Beijing, under pressure from Washington, agreed to support punitive UN sanctions against Pyongyang.

A *Washington Post* article, entitled “After detente with North Korea, Trump increasingly takes aim at a new foe—China,” noted the shift. “From an escalating trade war to a new defence budget that counters

Chinese maritime expansion, the Trump administration has taken aim at the East Asian power in a contest of wills that has led to a growing consensus in Beijing that the United States is seeking to contain China’s rise.”

Trump’s focus on China feeds directly into the intense political infighting in Washington over unsubstantiated allegations of “Russian interference” in the 2016 US presidential election. The divisions reflect sharp tactical differences in the American ruling elites over the direction of foreign policy, with powerful sections of the military-intelligence apparatus insisting that Russia, rather than China, is the main enemy.

It is no accident that these same critics have taken aim at Trump’s policy toward North Korea, which has been part of the preparations for confrontation with China.



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