

US threatens North Korea with resumption of war games

Peter Symonds
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Amid mounting signs that US-North Korea talks are breaking down, US Defence Secretary James Mattis announced yesterday that the Pentagon was ending its suspension of joint war games with South Korea. This highly provocative step is certain to further inflame tensions with North Korea following President Trump's decision last Friday to cancel Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's trip to Pyongyang for another round of negotiations.

At a Pentagon press conference, Mattis declared: "We took the step to suspend several of the largest exercises as a good-faith measure coming out of the Singapore summit... We have no plans at this time to suspend any more exercises." After his summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June, Trump announced that "we will be stopping the war games" with South Korea, describing the joint exercises as "very provocative."

Mattis noted that even after the Singapore summit, smaller joint exercises were "ongoing... all the time on the peninsula." He made clear that the announcement was aimed at putting pressure on North Korea by threatening to restart major annual war games scheduled for early next year. "We're going to see how the negotiations go and then we'll calculate the future," he said.

While the media routinely describes the joint exercises as defensive, they have always been a rehearsal for war with North Korea. Last year's massive Foal Eagle and Key Resolve drills which were delayed until after the Winter Olympics in South Korea in February, involved around 23,000 American and 300,000 South Korean troops. Since 2015, US-South Korean operational plans have dropped their defensive disguise and include "pre-emptive" strikes on North Korea and "decapitation" raids against its top leaders.

The suspension of large-scale military drills, now being reversed, was the only US concession made to North Korea. In a joint statement, Trump and Kim agreed to the "complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula," but the process, which was not spelled out even in general terms, has been interpreted differently from outset by the two sides.

The Trump administration has insisted that North Korea commit unilaterally to dismantle its nuclear facilities, hand over its nuclear weapons and allow highly intrusive inspections before any easing of crippling US and international sanctions or any moves towards a formal end to 1950–53 Korean War.

North Korea has frozen its nuclear and missile testing, taken steps towards dismantling some of its facilities and handed over the remains of US soldiers killed in Korean War. At the same time, it has called for a step-by-step process whereby it would dismantle its nuclear programs in return for sanctions relief and US security guarantees, including a formal peace treaty.

Having never agreed to unilaterally give up nuclear weapons, the North Korean regime publicly lashed out at Washington's "gangster-like demands" after Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang last month. According to the US press, the reason for Trump's decision last week to call off Pompeo's planned trip this week was a letter, variously described as "belligerent" and "aggressive," from a top North Korean official Kim Yong Chol.

The contents of the letter have not been made public, but it appears to be a warning that negotiations have reached a stalemate and could fail. Citing unnamed US officials, CNN said that the letter declared that talks were "again at stake and may fall apart." It pointed out that "the US is still not ready to meet (North Korean) expectations in terms of taking a step forward to sign a

peace treaty.”

Pyongyang has repeatedly called on the US to announce an end to the Korean War as a step towards a peace treaty. The fighting ended in 1953 with an armistice, but the two sides formally remain at war. Such a move would be a minimal gesture towards ending constant threats by successive US administrations to maintain “all options on the table,” including military attacks on North Korea. Last year Trump issued a series of bellicose statements including the threat to “totally destroy” North Korea.

An editorial last week in the *New York Times* made clear that sections of the US military-intelligence apparatus are opposed to even this limited step. “Administration officials and some experts,” it declared, “are worried that a peace declaration would open the door to withdrawing 28,500 American troops from South Korea, weakening the United States’ defence relationship with South Korea and its ability to take military action if needed.”

Citing unnamed officials, the *New York Times* yesterday reported that Mattis and national security adviser John Bolton were opposed to Trump declaring the end of the Korean War. “They both believe that North Korea should go first, and that any declaration from Pyongyang should be verified before the United States grants further concessions,” it stated.

The fact is that the so-called North Korean threat has been exploited for decades as a pretext for maintaining huge US military bases in South Korea and Japan that are not primarily aimed at North Korea, but against China. The Trump administration, which is ramping up trade war measures against Beijing, is also continuing the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, begun under the Obama administration, aimed against China.

In his tweets following the cancellation of Pompeo’s trip, Trump also denounced China, claiming that Beijing was easing pressure on Pyongyang because of “our much tougher Trading stance.” Directly linking further talks with North Korea with China acceptance of US trade demands, he said that Pompeo would likely return to Pyongyang “after our Trading relationship with China is resolved.”

Trump is also responding to intense criticism from the Democrats and in the US media, which have mocked his claim that the Singapore summit had ended the “North Korean threat.” The issue is connected to

the bitter infighting in Washington over foreign policy as to whether to confront China or Russia first as it seeks to maintain global US dominance. Whereas Trump has sought to exploit talks with North Korea to draw it into Washington’s machinations against Beijing, his factional opponents are using unsubstantiated allegations of “Russian interference” to try to make Moscow the prime target.

Trump’s decision to halt Pompeo’s talks with North Korea and threaten the resumption of war games with South Korea could rapidly lead to the renewal of extreme tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the danger of military conflict.



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