

Korean summit yields new agreement, but few tangible results

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The leaders of the two Koreas signed a declaration on Wednesday following two days of talks in Pyongyang on denuclearization and inter-Korean relations. South Korean President Moon Jae-in travelled to North Korea to hold his third summit this year with Chairman Kim Jong-un. While tensions have appeared to ease, the barely-veiled threat of a US military assault on impoverished North Korea still exists.

With Moon posing as a mediator, the latest agreement is aimed at restarting negotiations between North Korea and the US, which have been stalled since August when US President Trump cancelled Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's scheduled fourth trip to Pyongyang.

The declaration states that the North will take additional steps towards denuclearization and disarmament. During a press conference with Kim broadcast by the South Korean media, Moon stated that the two had discussed specific measures for the first time.

"The North has agreed to permanently shut down its Dongchang-ri missile engine testing facility and missile launch pad under the participation of experts from related countries," the South Korean president said.

The agreement, according to Moon, also stated: "Contingent upon corresponding measures by the United States, the North will also carry out further measures such as the permanent dismantlement of the Yeongbyeon nuclear facility." The installation includes North Korea's only nuclear reactor and an associated plutonium reprocessing plant.

Other parts of the agreement include cooperation on environmental and healthcare issues, reconnecting roads and railways between the two countries this year, and reopening the Kaesong Industrial Park along the border "if favorable conditions materialize."

Kim promised to visit Seoul by the end of the year as

well. In a separate agreement between the North and South military chiefs, the two sides will form an inter-Korean military committee to hold regular consultations.

Both Moon and Kim claimed that the agreement would bring about a new era of peace. Kim stated, "The September declaration will open a higher level for the improvement in relations [between the South and the North]... and bring closer the era of peace and prosperity."

As with other agreements and declarations though, nothing has actually been resolved. This fact was echoed by Cheon Seon-whun, an analyst at the South Korean think tank, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, who stated: "No matter how hard I look, I can find no real progress in denuclearization in today's announcements."

Pyongyang's pledge to dismantle the Yeongbyeon nuclear facility comes with the caveat that Washington takes "corresponding measures," which has consistently been the North's position.

Washington, however, refuses to relax sanctions or provide any security guarantees unless Pyongyang completely denuclearizes first, a fraught prospect for the North Korean leadership, which is seeking a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War.

North Korea knows the US could tear up any agreement or choose to attack after it disarms. Pyongyang has regularly pointed to Iraq and Libya as examples of Washington's backstabbing after making disarmament agreements. Trump's tearing up of the nuclear deal with Iran further underscores that political considerations would dictate resumed threats against the North, not Pyongyang's actual conduct.

Even if North Korea completely capitulates to US demands, this will not end the danger of war. Since the

dissolution of the Soviet Union, Washington has used the supposed North Korean threat as the rationale for maintaining and building up its military forces and hardware in the Asia-Pacific in order to maintain its hegemony in the region.

That Washington may choose to abrogate any future deal stems from this broader strategy, aimed above all at forcing China to submit to the interests of US imperialism, including if need be through waging war on the world's most populous nation. This was made clear at the beginning of the year when the Pentagon declared that "great power competition" would now be Washington's primary focus, singling out China and Russia.

For the time being, Washington has welcomed the results of the latest inter-Korean summit. Trump wrote on Twitter: "Kim Jong Un has agreed to allow Nuclear inspections, subject to final negotiations, and to permanently dismantle a test site and launch pad in the presence of international experts."

However, Kim did not agree to any nuclear inspections, an indication that the measures agreed to in Pyongyang did not go far enough for Washington, which is demanding a list of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and facilities in addition to inspections. Pyongyang has rejected both of these demands.

US Secretary of State Pompeo signalled yesterday that he was prepared to restart talks with North Korea and had invited its foreign minister, Ri Yong Ho, to meet during the UN General Assembly session next week in New York. He claimed that talks would result in the "rapid denuclearization" of North Korea, to be completed by January 2021.

Seoul expressed the hope that both sides would go ahead with the proposed second summit between Trump and Kim. In the end though, any talks between Pyongyang and Washington, whose demands the former has previously described as "gangster-like," would be used to emphasize the US ultimatum that North Korea abandon its alliance with China and join the US war drive, or become the first casualty in the conflict.

Moon has backed this war drive against North Korea and China, including by agreeing to host the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system. However, South Korea envisions turning North Korea into a cheap labor platform and

invited leading chaebol officials from Samsung, Hyundai Motors, and SK, among others as part of the delegation to Pyongyang.

These officials met with North Korea's Deputy Prime Minister Ri Yong-nam, in charge of matters on international economic cooperation. Both sides praised one another as Pyongyang is seeking to attract investment. Sin Han-yong, chairman of the South's Kaesong Industrial Complex Enterprise Association, stated: "I eagerly hope that inter-Korean economic cooperation projects will develop and expand considerably as a result of the summit."

The reopening of the Kaesong complex would be just one step towards allowing South Korean companies to exploit the North Korean working class more broadly. Current economic cooperation plans also include resuming tourist trips to the North's Mount Geumgang and rail and roadway construction.

However, Moon's statement that economic cooperation would only proceed if "favorable conditions materialize" implies that his government will not violate current US sanctions. Washington has previously expressed dissatisfaction with South Korea's economic push, warning Seoul not to ease US-led pressure on Pyongyang.

Moon and his delegation returned to the South on Thursday and will travel to New York on Sunday for the United Nations General Assembly meeting. The following day, he will meet with Trump to discuss the outcome of the summit.



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