

US-North Korean talks called off

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A key meeting between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and North Korea's chief negotiator Kim Yong Chol, due to take place in Washington yesterday, was abruptly called off at the last minute. While the US State Department said the meeting was just postponed, the cancellation is another sign of an impasse that has been reached over North Korea's nuclear program.

US officials told the *Wall Street Journal* that North Korea had called off the talks. No reasons have been given by either side, other than an implausible statement from a State Department spokesman that there had been "a scheduling issue."

Pyongyang's frustration had been evident in the lead-up to this week's meeting. Since June's Singapore summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, the North Korean regime has halted all nuclear and ballistic missile testing and taken a number of steps to indicate its willingness to denuclearise in return for security guarantees.

The US, on the other hand, has done virtually nothing, except suspend joint military exercises with South Korea. At the same time, Washington has insisted that North Korea proceed with dismantling its nuclear programs and facilities, destroying its nuclear arsenal and ending its production of ballistic missiles before the lifting of any crippling US-led sanctions on its economy.

Following Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang for talks in July, the North Korean ministry issued a statement blasting the US for "its unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearisation" and warned that trust between the two sides was at a "dangerous" stage.

Last Friday, Pyongyang went a step further, warning that it would restart its nuclear testing if the US did not make some corresponding concessions. A North Korean statement published by the state-run KCNA news agency declared that "the improvement of

relations and [continuing] sanctions are incompatible."

The statement added: "We gave all things possible to the US, things it hardly deserves, by taking pro-active and goodwill measures. What remains to be done is the US corresponding reply. Unless there is a reply, the DPRK [North Korea] will not move even 1 millimetre. How costly it may be."

North Korea not only has suspended its nuclear testing. It has shut down a missile testing facility, destroyed the entrances to its nuclear test site and promised to close its nuclear reactor and other facilities at Yongbyon. Pyongyang has also signalled it was preparing to let in international nuclear inspectors to examine its missile engine test site and its nuclear test site.

Speaking on Fox News on Sunday, Pompeo brushed aside Pyongyang's warning, declaring: "I'm not worried about rhetoric. We have seen this as we go through negotiations. Stray voltage happens to be all around us." He expected to see "real progress" that would lay the basis for a second summit between Trump and Kim. At the same time, Pompeo emphatically declared there would be "no economic relief until we have achieved our ultimate goal" of full, verifiable denuclearisation.

Following the announcement that yesterday's talks were called off, the US sought to downplay the cancellation. Trump told reporters: "We're very happy with how it's going with North Korea. We think it's going fine. We're in no rush... The sanctions are on. The missiles have stopped. The rockets have stopped. The hostages [jailed US citizens] are home."

Such comments are certain to infuriate North Korean leaders, who have made significant concessions. While it costs nothing to the Trump administration to drag out talks, the North Korean economy has been hit badly by sanctions that ban most of its exports and restrict imports of key items, including oil and petroleum

products. A US source familiar with the negotiations told CNN yesterday that North Korea is “getting really angry.”

In a further provocation against North Korea, the US military on Monday began to hold low-level joint drills with South Korea. While the exercise involved only 500 US and South Korean marines, Pyongyang will have noted it as a sign that the Pentagon can quickly reverse its suspension of drills in South Korea. The two militaries hold a series of major war games each year, the largest of which involved more than 300,000 troops last year, in what could only be interpreted as preparations for a full-scale war with North Korea.

The Trump administration’s hard-line stance is also creating tensions with the South Korean administration of President Moon Jae-in, who has held three summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Moon is seeking closer ties with North Korea, including closer economic cooperation and an easing of tensions along the demilitarised zone (DMZ) that separates the two countries.

At their third summit in September, Moon and Kim agreed to establish a “no-fly” zone 40 kilometres to the north and south from the military demarcation line. The agreement also bars live-fire drills involving fixed-wing aircraft and air-to-ground guided missiles in the no-fly zone—a practice that South Korea and the US carried out routinely in the past. Pompeo was reportedly incensed by the agreement and conveyed his displeasure to South Korea’s foreign minister.

The US has also responded negatively to South Korean appeals for exemptions from US-led sanctions in order to permit joint economic projects with North Korea. The US and South Korea last week announced a joint working party to strengthen coordination of “sanctions implementation and inter-Korean cooperation that comply with the United Nations sanctions.”

The *Financial Times* reported last weekend: “Last month the US Treasury Department had warned several South Korean banks against doing business with Pyongyang after the lenders announced an array of unification-themed financial products, some of which were aimed at potential customers north of the border.” The US embassy in Seoul reinforced the message by directly contacting corporations to warn them against breaking sanctions.

Just over a year ago, President Trump warned from the podium of the United Nations that the US would “totally destroy” North Korea if it threatened the United States. While neither side has signalled a complete breakdown of talks, the Trump administration’s one-sided demands and the lack of any significant steps toward a deal are a warning that a resumption of the dangerous confrontation is certainly possible.



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