

Joint US-South Korean war games amid rising tensions with North Korea

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The failure of the second summit last month between US President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to reach an agreement highlights the danger of a renewed slide towards confrontation and conflict. While there is as yet no return to Trump's previous bellicose threats of war, negotiations are clearly stalled, if not unravelling.

The only commitment made at the first summit in Singapore last year was to the “denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula”—a deliberately vague pledge that could be interpreted differently by both sides. The US is insisting that North Korea completely dismantle its nuclear arsenal and programs, while Pyongyang is undoubtedly seeking a winding back of the US military presence in South Korea.

Trump, who has invested considerable political capital in the negotiations, is under fire, particularly from the Democrats. Media reports have repeatedly noted the “failure” of North Korea to dismantle its nuclear facilities and its continued accumulation of the fissile nuclear material used to manufacture weapons.

No such deal was reached in Singapore, however. All that was agreed was that North Korea would halt its testing of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and in return the US would suspend its joint war games with South Korea. Now even these commitments appear to be collapsing.

The US and South Korea announced last week that they would terminate the annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle military drills held in each northern spring so as to facilitate the diplomatic process. The massive Foal Eagle exercise, involving more than 300,000 troops along with war planes, naval vessels, tanks and artillery, has been a thinly disguised dress rehearsal for war with North Korea.

Far from completely abolishing the drills, they will be

replaced by what are purportedly smaller scale exercises. Like Key Resolve, its replacement known as Dong Maeng is a computer-simulated command and control exercise that has been running over the past week.

As for the huge Foal Eagle field exercises, the *Korean Herald* reported that the South Korean Defence Ministry plans a series of smaller, low-key drills to be conducted at regular intervals. “It is important for the armies to train and maintain to a standard of readiness. These exercises are crucial in sustaining and strengthening the alliance,” the ministry stated.

North Korea reacted angrily to the news that the modified war games would proceed. The official KCNA news agency declared that the “ill-boding moves” were “a wanton violation” of the joint statement with the US issued in Singapore “in which the removal of hostility and tensions were committed to.”

The US-based think tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, claimed last Friday, based on recent satellite imagery, that North Korea was making “continued preparations” on its main Sohae launch site, consistent with readying for “the delivery of a rocket.” Earlier reports indicated that the test pad, which Pyongyang had indicated it would dismantle, was being rebuilt.

Trump reacted last Friday by saying: “I would be very disappointed if I saw testing.” The Sohae site has not in the past been used to launch ballistic missiles, but rather to send satellites into space. North Korea, which has previously insisted that satellite launches are not covered by UN sanctions, could well decide to take such as step to put pressure on the Trump administration.

Both sides have been relatively restrained in their

rhetoric following the failure of last month's summit in Hanoi. A commentary last Friday in *Rodong Sinmun*, the newspaper of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party, acknowledged for the first time that the summit had broken down and blamed the US for dashing the hopes of "people in and outside the North." At the same time, it expressed the hope that the peace process "will proceed smoothly and the North Korea-United States relations will improve soon."

North Korea has been pushing for a step-by-step process to lift the US and UN sanctions as it dismantles its nuclear facilities and arsenal. The US, however, is demanding that Pyongyang complete the process of denuclearisation—in effect giving up its bargaining chips—before the US will ease crippling economic penalties and establish diplomatic relations.

A senior administration official told the media last Friday that sanctions would not be lifted until all the threats were removed—which he defined broadly as North Korea's entire nuclear program, as well as demanding for the first time the dismantling of its chemical and biological weapons programs. The official also stated that Washington remained open to further talks.

Speaking on the ABC's "This Week" program yesterday, National Security Adviser John Bolton declared that Trump was open to another meeting with the North Korean leader. "He said he's open to a third summit, none has been scheduled, and some time may have to go by," Bolton said. "But he's prepared to engage again because he does think that the prospects for North Korea, which he's been trying to persuade Kim Jong-un to accept if they denuclearised, are really quite spectacular."

The remark suggests that Trump is pushing for more than a deal with North Korea to end its nuclear programs. The "spectacular" prospects would include ending the decades-long economic and diplomatic blockade following the end of the 1950–53 Korean War to allow the transformation of North Korea into a new cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

According to South Korean economists, the North Korean economy contracted by 3.5 percent as a result of the increasingly crippling sanctions regime, and could have shrunk by another 5 percent last year.

In holding out the prospect of an economic miracle, Trump is also seeking to woo North Korea away from

its formal ally China, and into closer relations with the United States. This is part of the far broader US strategy of undermining China economically and diplomatically as well as encircling it militarily in preparation for war.

If North Korea does not meet US demands, it faces the prospect of even harsher sanctions and a dramatic escalation of tensions that could result in war. It is worth recalling that less than a year ago, Trump was belittling Kim, whom he now describes as a friend, as "rocket man" and warning in apocalyptic terms that North Korea faced "total destruction."



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