

US-North Korean nuclear talks stall again

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Talks between the US and North Korea over denuclearisation have broken down again after top negotiators met in Stockholm last Saturday. The two sides presented conflicting reports of the meeting with Pyongyang rejecting a Swedish invitation to return for further negotiations in two weeks.

A spokesperson for the North Korean foreign ministry declared on Sunday: “We have no intention to hold such sickening negotiations as what happened this time, before the US takes a substantial step.” Pyongyang is seeking a step-by-step reduction in punitive US-led economic sanctions and security guarantees in return for dismantling its nuclear arsenal and facilities.

North Korea’s chief negotiator Kim Myong-gil told the media that the talks collapsed because the American side arrived “empty-handed,” with no new proposals. Kim said that he had offered a practical proposal on how to end the stalemate in negotiations, but the American negotiators led Stephen Biegun had repeated their “old position and attitude.”

The US has insisted that North Korea undertake a complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation before it will begin the lifting of economic sanctions. It has also rejected North Korea’s call for a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War that concluded in 1953 with an armistice that ended armed conflict, but not the war.

After repeatedly threatening the military annihilation of North Korea in 2017, US President Trump made an abrupt about-face and held a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June 2018.

The summit, however, achieved little more than a vaguely worded, joint statement in which Kim agreed to “work toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula,” in return for economic and security guarantees from Washington. North Korea suspended its nuclear and long-range missile testing, while the US

put off major joint war games with South Korea.

A second summit meeting of the two leaders in Hanoi in February broke up in acrimony without any agreement for further talks. North Korea offered to dismantle its key nuclear reactor and processing facility at Yongbyon in return for a significant easing of sanctions, which apply to most of its exports and many imports. The US, however, demanded an across the board freeze of other nuclear-related activities.

Last weekend’s talks took place after Trump met briefly with Kim Jong-un on June 30 in the demilitarised zone between the two Koreas. In contrast to North Korea’s response to the negotiations in Sweden, the US State Department declared that American negotiators had gone to Stockholm with “creative ideas and had good discussions.” It also announced that Washington had accepted the Swedish invitation for further talks.

Having secured a halt to North Korea’s nuclear and missile testing, Trump has made clear that he is willing to drag out talks indefinitely. Facing a presidential election next year, the ongoing negotiations are one of the only tangible outcomes that Trump can point to from his reckless and chaotic foreign policy.

North Korea, however, announced in April that it would not continue the talks beyond the end of the year, if there was not a significant reduction in the sanctions regime that is crippling its economy. At the end of the year, new sanctions come into force requiring Russia and China to expel North Korean workers—a major source of foreign currency for Pyongyang.

The North Korean foreign ministry issued a statement on Sunday declaring that there would be no further talks unless the US made a substantial move to “complete and irreversible withdrawal of hostile policy.” It also reiterated the end-of-year deadline for significant progress in negotiations.

It also suggested that Trump was intending to try and force a one-sided agreement on North Korea in order to claim a major diplomatic win and boost his electoral stocks. It noted that the US had not made any preparations for last weekend's negotiations and was abusing the "dialogue for its domestic policy [interests]."

The standoff between the US and North Korea is bound up with the Trump administration's far broader and escalating economic and strategic confrontation with China. Trump's willingness to meet with Kim last year had less to do with US concerns about North Korea's small and still primitive nuclear arsenal, than with his determination to draw Pyongyang away from Beijing and into Washington's camp.

After Kim came to power in 2011 following the death of his father, relations with China deteriorated markedly, with Pyongyang denouncing its ally for implementing the harsh UN sanctions on North Korea. Over the past year, however, Chinese President Xi Jinping has sought to mend ties, making a two-day state visit to Pyongyang in June—his first since taking office in 2012.

Immediately following the breakdown of US-North Korean talks on Saturday, Kim and Xi exchanged effusive congratulatory messages to mark 70 years since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1949. Xi promised to promote "long-term, healthy and stable" relations with North Korea, while Kim declared that the alliance had been forged "at the cost of blood" in the Korean War and had "weathered all tempests while sharing weal and woe with each other."

Xi is clearly concerned to prevent any drift by Pyongyang towards Washington that could result in a hostile, pro-US neighbour on its northern borders. Kim, who leads a small, economically backward country that has confronted a US diplomatic and economic blockade for more than six decades, is seeking to balance between Beijing and Washington. A move towards improved relations with China could be used as a lever if talks with the US do resume.



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