

US offers talks to North Korea as it ramps up pressure on China

Ben McGrath**28 June 2021**

Last week, representatives from the United States, South Korea, and Japan met in Seoul to discuss North Korea. While portrayed as an attempt by Washington to reduce tensions with Pyongyang, over the latter's nuclear program, the discussions between the three are part of the ongoing war drive in East Asia, spearheaded by the Biden administration and directed against China.

The US special representative for North Korean affairs, Sung Kim, arrived in Seoul on June 19 for a five-day trip, holding trilateral meetings with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts, No Gyu-deok and Takehiro Funakoshi. Kim, who previously served as ambassador to South Korea during the Obama administration, also met with President Moon Jae-in and other South Korean officials from the Unification Ministry, which is responsible for North Korea policy.

The trip was a continuation of the plans established by Presidents Biden and Moon at their summit in May. During his visit to Washington, Moon backed the US war drive against China.

The talks lacked the bombastic appearance that has characterized US threats against the impoverished North Korea in recent years. Kim stated that Washington continued "to hope that the DPRK will respond positively to our outreach and our offer to meet anywhere, anytime without preconditions." DPRK refers to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korea's formal name. As a minor enticement to return to talks, Kim and No Gyu-deok stated they would consider dissolving a US/South Korean "working group" forum, opposed by Pyongyang.

No said of the discussions, "We wish to restore the structure where inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations reinforce each other in a mutually beneficial way." No also held bilateral discussions with Funakoshi, an indication that Seoul and Tokyo are further developing

their relationship, under Washington's auspices. The US sees both of its allies, which together host approximately 80,000 US troops, along with their radar and ballistic missile systems, as key elements in future war plans.

The offer of talks is not a turn away from the war drive, but instead, a reworking of US imperialism's agenda. Washington is attempting to de-escalate tensions with Pyongyang, as it focuses on ramping up pressure on China. The Biden administration is not ruling out the possibility of greater aggression against North Korea, but hopes that it can turn Pyongyang away from Beijing, to deprive China of its only military ally and buffer, which separates Manchuria from US bases in South Korea. These bases would be used to direct American and South Korean troops in an attack on China.

In this vein, the offer of talks to North is similar to Biden's recent summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in which the US leader appeared to try to ease tensions with Moscow, in order to isolate Beijing from potential allies.

North Korea's Foreign Minister Ri Son-gwon responded to the US offer last Wednesday, saying, "We are not considering even the possibility of any contact with the US, let alone having it, which would get us nowhere, only taking up precious time." Kim Yo-jong, the influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, stated the previous day that the US had the wrong expectations about dialogue with Pyongyang.

The US State Department responded to these comments, stating, "We remain open to diplomacy and hope the DPRK will respond positively to our efforts of dialogue."

There are some indications that Pyongyang may, in fact, be considering resuming talks with Washington.

The trip by US official Sung Kim followed a four-day plenary session of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers Party of Korea (WPK), during which Kim Jong-un reportedly “stressed the need to get prepared for both dialogue and confrontation.” It was Kim’s first direct statement on the US since Biden’s inauguration.

Talks between Washington and North Korea have been stalled since February 2019, when then-President Donald Trump met Kim Jong-un in Hanoi for a second summit. The meeting broke down, without any agreement, after Trump walked out. The first meeting between the two took place the previous June in Singapore, but yielded little more than a vague declaration. While Pyongyang made some conciliatory gestures, Washington flatly refused to lift any sanctions, unless the North agreed to fully denuclearize.

During the first summit, Trump issued an ultimatum to Kim, demonstrated by a short video showing a glamorized and fictitious North Korean future if Kim moved closer to the US. At the same time, the movie contained images of the US launching military strikes on North Korea, effectively telling Kim these were his only two choices.

Having been in the crosshairs of US imperialism for decades, the Stalinist regime in North Korea is well aware of what happened to countries like Iraq and Libya that have previously tried to make deals with Washington. Pyongyang regards its nuclear weapon and missile programs as crucial bargaining chips in negotiations, and a means of preventing military attack.

US demand for complete North Korean denuclearization as the precondition for any significant easing of crippling sanctions, has resulted in the breakdown of deals under multiple American administrations.

Sung Kim also made clear that Washington would continue to uphold the sanctions regime against Pyongyang. He also made a barely veiled criticism of China: “We will also urge all UN member states, especially UN Security Council members, to do the same, to address the threat posed to the international community by the DPRK.” Washington has regularly accused China of violating the sanctions in its trade relations with North Korea.

For the time being, Pyongyang and Beijing are making a show of solidarity. On June 21, *Rodong*

Sinmun, the official paper of the WPK, published an op-ed by Chinese Ambassador to North Korea Li Jinjun, that emphasized cooperation between Beijing and Pyongyang.

“China and North Korea know the importance of peace, as they have gone through suffering together,” Li wrote. China and North Korea “will actively contribute to regional peace, stability, development and prosperity, while strengthening communication at every possible level, and discuss issues necessary for long-term stability.” North Korea’s Ambassador to Beijing Ri Ryong-nam published a similar op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party’s paper, the *People’s Daily*.

US machinations in East Asia are not aimed at bringing peace and stability to the region, as Washington so often claims. Whatever offers it is willing to make to North Korea are based on its calculations for maintaining hegemony in the region. The danger remains of a catastrophic war, if Pyongyang does not bend to the will of US imperialism.



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