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Amid stalled US-North Korean talks, second Trump-Kim summit mooted

Seven months after President Trump met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore, talks over the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula remain stalled without a detailed agreement to implement the commitments made by both sides at the summit. Now a second Trump-Kim summit is being mooted.

In his New Year address, Kim restated his “firm will” to denuclearise, saying that North Korea had “declared at home and abroad that we would neither make and test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them.”

Kim did, however, hint at growing frustration in Pyongyang over Washington’s refusal to ease sanctions on North Korea or to take steps towards the signing of a formal peace treaty to end the 1950–53 Korean War. Fighting in that devastating war ended with the signing of an armistice, but the state of war was not ended. The US has maintained North Korea’s diplomatic and economic isolation for more than six decades.

Kim noted that North Korea had “taken various practical measures,” adding that if the US responded “with trustworthy measures and practical actions... bilateral relations will develop wonderfully at a fast pace.” Pyongyang has not only halted its nuclear and missile tests, but dismantled its nuclear test site and a key missile engine facility.

In a thinly veiled warning, the North Korean leader declared that Pyongyang could be “compelled to explore a new path” if the US “seeks to force something upon us unilaterally and remains unchanged in its sanctions and pressure.” The US imposed

additional sanctions on North Korean figures last month, provoking an angry reaction from Pyongyang.

North Korea has been hit hard by sanctions imposed through the UN Security Council and extra, unilateral US punitive measures—all of which remain in place. The latest trade figures with China, by far North Korea's largest trading partner, showed an 88 percent decline in Chinese imports for 2018 year-on-year, and a 33 percent decline in its exports to North Korea. In 2017, North Korea's economy shrank by 3.5 percent, according to South Korean estimates.

Last week Kim made a two-day trip to Beijing in a bid to gain Chinese support to push the US to ease sanctions. The visit was also timed to coincide with US-China talks to end the escalating trade war between the two countries. Chinese President Xi Jinping was clearly sending a message to Washington that Beijing would not be so accommodating to the US pressure campaign on Pyongyang if the trade disputes were not resolved.

During the visit, Kim reiterated his support for a second summit with Trump to “jointly push for a comprehensive resolution of the Korean Peninsula issue.” Such a meeting was mooted as far back as last September, but the proposal has languished for months. The plan re-emerged in December and the latest media reports indicate that concrete planning, including possible venues, is underway. Top North Korean negotiator Kim Yong Chol is reportedly preparing to visit Washington to finalise arrangements.

The Trump administration, however, has repeatedly declared that it is not willing to begin lifting sanctions until North Korea has met all US demands and completely dismantled its nuclear arsenal and facilities. As long as North Korea has effectively frozen its nuclear programs by ending testing, the US is prepared to string out any talks.

Trump bragged to reporters last week: “Now I say this, North Korea, we're doing very well. And again, no rockets. There's no rockets. There's no anything. We are doing very well... You would right now be in a nice, big fat war in Asia with North Korea if I wasn't elected president.”

However, the current unstable situation cannot last indefinitely. For North Korea to dismantle its only bargaining chip and allow highly intrusive international inspections with nothing in return is highly unlikely. However, the continuing, intense US pressure on North Korea points to underlying strategic motives that go beyond its demand for denuclearisation.

Trump is pushing for a deal with North Korea amid an intensifying confrontation with China on all fronts—diplomatic, economic and military—that is part of US preparations

for war. Washington's approach to North Korea is not primarily to dismantle its nuclear arsenal, which has been the pretext for its military bases in Japan and South Korea, and for its military build-up in Asia firstly under President Obama, and now Trump.

Rather, the unstated aim of Trump's diplomacy has been to "flip" North Korea—in other words, to induce the Pyongyang regime, a formal military ally of China, through threats and bribes, to reorient towards Washington. In response to North Korean leader Kim's speech in the New Year, Trump noted that "North Korea possesses great economic potential"—by implication, if it meets US demands.

Kim is well aware of the fate of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi—the Iraqi and Libyan leaders who were brutally killed after agreeing to US demands to end their so-called weapons of mass destruction programs.

As a result, Kim has continued to manoeuvre. Relations between Beijing and Pyongyang became particularly bitter after the China voted repeatedly to support UN sanctions proposed by the US. However, in the lead up to his first summit with Trump, he mended relations with China in a bid to gain more leverage in negotiations. His latest visit to Beijing is another indication to Washington that North Korea has other options.

The threat of military conflict remains. When Trump talks in his own crude fashion of "a nice, big fat war in Asia with North Korea," it should be recalled that is exactly what he was preparing in 2017. His menacing threats culminated in an address to the United Nations where he warned that the US would "totally destroy" North Korea if it did not agree to denuclearise.

Whether or not Trump succeeds in dislodging North Korea from China's orbit and further isolating Beijing, the main US objective remains: to undermine and weaken China so to subordinate it to US interests by all available means, including if necessary through a catastrophic war.