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South Korean president holds talks with top North Korean officials

South Korean President Moon Jae-in met Sunday with a North Korean delegation that traveled across the Demilitarized Zone to attend the closing ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. The three-day visit takes place as the Trump administration in Washington continues to threaten the impoverished North with complete destruction.

The North's eight-member delegation is led by Kim Yong-chol, a high-ranking military official and chief for inter-Korean affairs. It includes Choe Kang-il, deputy director-general for North American affairs, responsible for negotiating nuclear issues and diplomacy with the United States.

During Sunday's meeting, the two sides reportedly discussed the prospects for North Korean-US talks. Moon's spokesman Kim Eui-gyeom told the media: "President Moon pointed out that US-North Korea dialogue must be held at an early date, even for an improvement in the South-North Korea relationship, and the fundamental resolution of Korean Peninsula issues."

The response from the visiting Pyongyang officials was positive, according to the spokesman, who said: "The North Korean delegation also agreed that North Korea-US relations must develop along with the South-North Korea relationship while noting (the North) has enough intention to hold North Korea-US dialogue."

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders quickly issued a noncommittal response, saying: "We will see if Pyongyang's message today, that it is willing to hold talks, represents the first steps along the path to denuclearization." The Trump administration

has insisted that North Korea show signs that it is committed to giving up its nuclear arsenal before negotiations can start. Last Friday, the US imposed a new round of sanctions and Trump again threatened North Korea with war if it did not denuclearise.

Sunday's meeting was the second between Moon and high-level figures in the Pyongyang regime in recent weeks. The president earlier met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong who passed on a letter from her brother calling for an inter-Korean summit. However, Moon ruled out an early meeting, saying on February 17 that people expecting talks soon "might be a little too anxious."

Moon has also emphasized that the South Korea-US relationship remains "as strong and robust as ever," reflecting fears in US and South Korean ruling circles that Pyongyang is trying to drive a wedge between the allies. Moon stressed that Trump supports him "100 percent."

For all the talk of peace during the recent Olympic Games, the Moon administration remains firmly tied to the US alliance. It is trying to balance between its commitments to US imperialism and hopes of exploiting economic relations with China and low-paid labor in the North, all while trying to defuse growing social tensions domestically.

However, Washington has pressed Seoul not to hold talks with Pyongyang. Following in the footsteps of Vice President Mike Pence, Trump's daughter and advisor Ivanka Trump attended the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics where she pointedly did not talk to North Korean officials. The official purpose of her four-day trip was to reaffirm the "maximum pressure campaign to ensure that the Korean Peninsula is denuclearized."

Trump's administration, like those of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, has regularly scuttled any attempts at diplomacy with Pyongyang. On Friday, Trump announced "the heaviest sanctions ever imposed on a country before." He warned that if North Korea did not bend to Washington's will, the next "phase" of US aggression would be "very, very unfortunate for the world." Pyongyang denounced the sanctions as an act of war.

Despite its bluster at times against the United States, Pyongyang's main aim is to push for a peace treaty with the US to formally end the Korean War, hoping that would allow access to international markets for its young, emerging capitalist class. In the past, North Korea has offered up its workers as a source of ultra-cheap labor, most notably at the Kaesong Industrial Complex on the border with the South.

Far from preparing to talk, the Trump administration is gearing up for a conflict that would not only destroy North Korea but could draw other major powers such as China and Russia into a world war fought with nuclear weapons.

The US rationale for launching a criminal war of aggression on North Korea—a conflict that would likely kill hundreds of thousands, if not millions, in just the opening days—is the unsubstantiated claim that Pyongyang is only “months away” from obtaining long-range ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. Even if true, North Korea’s limited nuclear arsenal pales into insignificance compared to the thousands of US nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems at Trump’s disposal to inflict “fire and fury” on North Korea.

The US military build-up and threats against North Korea is part of a far broader strategy aimed against China, which Washington regards as its chief obstacle to global hegemony. Trump is continuing the “pivot to Asia” policy, begun under the Obama administration, aimed at undermining Chinese diplomatic and economic influence in the region, and ultimately preparing for war with Beijing.

In April, massive Foal Eagle/Key Resolve war exercises between the US and South Korea are scheduled to take place. They will undoubtedly raise tensions with the North once again. Hundreds of thousands of troops will participate, likely including those tasked with assassinating key North Korean leaders. South Korean Defense Minister Song Young-moo will join his US counterpart James Mattis to announce plans for the war games before the end of next month.