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US and North Korean officials discuss Trump-Kim summit

Behind-the-scenes talks are underway between US and North Korean officials over a possible summit between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The talks about talks have been taking place as Trump installs two militarists—Mike Pompeo and John Bolton—as secretary of state and national security adviser, respectively.

During his Senate confirmation hearing on Thursday, Pompeo re-affirmed his support for military action to end the so-called North Korean nuclear threat. He said he was “not optimistic,” based on past record, that the Pyongyang regime would agree to dismantle its nuclear program. Pompeo insisted that the US would not “provide rewards” before “we get that outcome permanently, irreversibly.” He was “hopeful that President Trump can achieve that through sound diplomacy.”

The US is effectively demanding that North Korea destroy its nuclear arsenal and dismantle its nuclear facilities ahead of any easing of crippling sanctions or moves to end decades of US-led diplomatic isolation and military threats. Previous denuclearisation deals with North Korea in 1994 and 2007 were sabotaged, not by Pyongyang, but by Washington—leading to deep suspicion in North Korea.

While claiming he did not support “regime-change” in Pyongyang, Pompeo made clear that the US would attack North Korea if it did not bow to Washington’s demands. He said Trump would not allow North Korea to have “an arsenal of nuclear weapons capable of striking the United States of America,” adding that Defence Secretary James Mattis “has

been directed to present to the president a set of [military] options,” should diplomatic efforts fail.

Asked if he would envisage a scenario where he would support a US ground invasion of North Korea, Pompeo declared: “Could I imagine one? Yes, yes senator, I could ... Yes I can imagine times when America would need to take a response that moved past diplomacy.” When it was suggested that such an invasion would be “catastrophic,” Pompeo interjected: “I agree with that.”

Bolton took over this week as Trump’s national security adviser—a post that does not require congressional confirmation. Prior to his nomination, Bolton was contemptuous of any suggestion of talks with Pyongyang and pushed for a military attack on North Korea. He wrote a *Wall Street Journal* commentary in February setting out a phony legal argument to justify such a war and emphasising it could “not wait until the last minute.”

The character of the proposed Trump-Kim summit is underscored by the fact that Pompeo and Bolton are in charge of preparing it. Whether by design or accident, the proposal for a meeting, possibly in late May or early June, took the focus off the Korean Peninsula as the Trump administration prepared to launch its war on Syria, risking conflict with nuclear-armed Russia. In the lead-up to a summit, North Korea agreed to postpone any nuclear or missile testing.

The American media has confirmed that direct talks have been held between US and North Korean officials. A Trump official told the *Wall Street Journal* last Sunday that “the US has confirmed that Kim Jong-un is willing to discuss the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.” South Korean officials who had met with Kim, briefed Trump on Pyongyang’s offer of talks on the nuclear issue in March, when the US president agreed to the summit.

A huge gulf exists, however, between what the US and North Korea mean by denuclearisation. While Washington is demanding an immediate end to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and an ever-more intrusive inspection regime, Pyongyang will undoubtedly press its longstanding call for security guarantees from the US. For North Korea, “denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula” means an end to the US military presence in South Korea, which includes nuclear-capable warships and strategic bombers. CNN reported last weekend that Pompeo, who is currently CIA director, and a team of CIA officials have taken the lead in preparing the summit via “intelligence back-channels.” The article said: “American and North Korean officials have spoken several times and have even met in a third country, with a focus on nailing down a location for the

talks.” Efforts had been made to set up a meeting between Pompeo and his North Korean counterpart to discuss the framework for the summit. A location had yet to be agreed, however.

Even though Pompeo has been nominated as secretary of state, it is significant that the CIA has effectively sidelined the State Department in a matter of foreign policy. It is another indication that Trump’s offer to take part in a summit with Kim is a cynical manoeuvre. The encounter, if it does take place, could well result in a US provocation calculated to provide the pretext for war.

Both sides are shoring up support ahead of any summit. In late March, Kim visited Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing—his first trip abroad as North Korean leader—in a bid to mend the increasingly fractured relations between the two allies. On Tuesday, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho held talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Moscow and extended an invitation for Lavrov to visit Pyongyang.

President Trump is due to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Florida next week, with North Korea high on the agenda. Abe, who has been dismissive of any talks with North Korea, was caught off guard by Trump’s announcement to hold the summit. Abe will be seeking reassurances that Japanese interests are taken into account in any discussions with Pyongyang.

In his confirmation hearing, Pompeo declared that any summit would seek an agreement “that the North Korean leadership will step away from its efforts to hold America at risk with nuclear weapons.” US State Department spokeswoman Katina Adams had to offer reassurances that the US remained committed to defending its ally Japan and to complete denuclearisation, not simply the abandonment of long-range nuclear missiles. North Korea says it already has missiles capable of hitting both Japan and South Korea.

Amid the discussion about a summit, the US and South Korea are holding massive joint military exercises, involving up to 300,000 troops and a range of heavy armaments, that amount to a rehearsal for war with North Korea. At the same time, Britain has announced the dispatch of a third warship, the HMS Albion, to the Asia Pacific to join US-led efforts “to keep up pressure and strictly enforce existing sanctions” on North Korea.