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Trump offers North Korea “incremental” denuclearisation ahead of planned summit

Addressing journalists yesterday at the White House, President Donald Trump repeatedly appealed to the North Korean regime to meet his administration’s terms for a possible meeting with its leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore on June 12.

Trump spoke to the media before a meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who held highly-orchestrated “peace talks” with Kim on April 26.

Questions were directed to Trump on the apparent breakdown of relations that occurred when North Korea suspended top-level meetings with South Korea on May 16 and threatened to pull out of the June 12 summit. Pyongyang alleged that an annual US-South Korean air force exercise was a “challenge” to the peace talks and a “provocation” stemming from the Trump’s administration’s policy of “maximum pressure”—meaning harsh economic sanctions and ongoing military threats—against North Korea.

Yesterday, however, both Trump and Moon exuded optimism that talks would ultimately proceed on US terms, even if they did not go ahead on June 12. The core US demand until now has been that North Korea commit to “complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation”—understood to mean handing over its small arsenal of nuclear weapons and dismantling its nuclear weapons facilities and programs.

Trump stated: “There are certain conditions that we want and I think we will get those conditions. And if we don’t, then we don’t have a meeting ... If it doesn’t happen, maybe it will happen later. Maybe it will happen at a different time.”

In the most significant concession offered to the North Korean regime, Trump for the first time indicated that “denuclearisation” could take place over an undefined period.

Asked whether North Korean disarmament would have to be “all-in-one” or “incremental,” Trump stated: “It would certainly be better if it were all in one. Does it have to be? I don’t think I want to totally commit myself ... You know, you do have some physical reasons that it may not be able to do that.”

Trump’s statement goes to the heart of the diplomatic intrigue underway in East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. North Korea’s nuclear weapons are not the primary issue. Rather, the fate of Korean peninsula is embroiled in the complex and increasingly fraught struggle between US imperialism and China over geo-strategic and economic dominance in the region.

In exchange for becoming what would be essentially a US client state against China, the Trump administration is offering the North Korean elite the promise of financial and economic pay-offs and, potentially, inclusion in the US-South Korea military alliance.

The US is calculating that Pyongyang’s rhetoric and actions stem from its utter desperation. China, anxious to deprive the White House of any further pretexts for trade war measures against Chinese corporations, has enforced the US-dictated sanctions on the regime. The result has been a 95 percent collapse of North Korea’s exports, most of which go to China, and severe disruption to the ruling clique’s ability to obtain foreign currency and wealth. Of less concern to the North Korean regime, the United Nations World Food Program estimated this month that 40 percent of the country’s 25 million people suffer malnutrition and one third of young women and children under 5 are afflicted with anemia.

Washington is aware that the North Korean ruling elite is under intense pressure from China not to make any agreements with the US that are detrimental to Chinese strategic and economic interests. Since the 1950-53 Korean War, North Korea has served as a buffer between China’s northern borders and US and allied forces in East Asia. The permanent state of tension on the Korean peninsula has left the north vastly underdeveloped, and deprived corporations based in South Korea of a land link to Eurasia, objectively adding incentive to transnational companies to invest in China instead.

Trump again blamed Chinese counter-intrigues for North Korea calling the summit into question. In what could only be interpreted as an implicit warning in Beijing, he declared: “When Kim Jong-un had a meeting with President Xi [Jinping] in China, the second

meeting ... I think there was a change in attitude from Kim Jong-un ... I don't like that. I don't like it from the standpoint of China.”

The US president made a series of overtures to the North Korean elite to “flip” into the US sphere of influence and out of China's.

Asked whether the US would “guarantee the safety of the regime of North Korea” and Kim Jong-un, Trump stated: “Yes, we will guarantee his safety ... He will be safe. He will be happy. His country will be rich ... South Korea, China and Japan ... they will be willing to help and I believe invest very, very large sums of money into helping to make North Korea great.”

Trump made it clear that the South Korean government's rhetoric about “reunification” did not mean the end of the division of the Korean peninsula. North Korea and its dictatorship would remain in place, supported by US imperialism. The border would remain sealed for the North Korean population, blocking them from seeking to migrate for jobs in the more prosperous south.

The US president asserted: “You know that border was artificially imposed many, many years ago—and imposed to a certain extent, and to a very large extent, by us [the US]. It's an artificial border, but it is a border nevertheless ... I would say that we are looking, certainly, right now, at two Koreas. You're going to have a very, very successful North Korea, and you're going to have a very successful, and you already do, South Korea.”

As for reunification, Trump said: “Maybe someday in the future—it wouldn't be now—but someday in the future, maybe they'll get together and you'll have one Korea ... as long as they both wanted that.”

Trump mapped out, in his own semi-coherent fashion, what was labelled the “Sunshine Policy” in the mid-1990s. Based on the experience of Germany, US imperialism and the South Korean capitalist class concluded that any unification of the two states would be too costly and, moreover, prevent them taking advantage of the militarised regime in the north.

Instead, North Korea would be transformed into a cheap labour and low tax haven for South Korean, American and other transnational corporations. Its brutally repressed working class would be made available for ruthless exploitation in free trade zones that drew investment away from China and other cheap labour regions. Rail and road links would be built through the north into Russia and onto the European Union. Energy networks would link South Korea, and via undersea pipelines, Japan, to the oil and gas resources of Russia's Far East.

The North Korean elite would enrich themselves by emulating their Chinese and Vietnamese Stalinist counterparts and becoming “joint partners” in various capitalist enterprises. The North Korean military, re-equipped and modernised by the US and South Korea, would be redirected from facing south to facing north, threatening China’s northern provinces, potentially with a remaining stockpile of nuclear weapons.

South Korean-based companies would use the threat to move north to try to shatter what is left of the limited gains in wages, conditions and democratic rights that the South Korean working class won through massive struggles in the 1980s against the then US-backed military dictatorship. In the event of a mass movement of South Korean workers that seriously threatened capitalist interests, North Korean military units could be brought south to repress it, as Chinese peasant-based troops were used to crush the 1989 workers’ movement in China.

This is the “future” being actively pursued by US imperialism and the South Korean government of Moon Jae-in.

If Kim Jong-un’s regime, with Chinese backing, rejects the gangster-like “offer they can’t refuse,” the immense danger is that the Trump administration will carry out its threat to “totally destroy” North Korea.