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After nuclear talks, North Korea denounces Washington's "gangster-like" demands

Two days of talks between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and top North Korean official Kim Yong Chol in Pyongyang have ended with a blistering attack by North Korea on the lack of good faith by the US. The recriminations between Washington and Pyongyang threaten a rapid slide back towards confrontation and war.

The Trump administration's chief concern in negotiations with North Korea is not ending the supposed nuclear threat, but preparing for a wider conflict with China by aligning Pyongyang with Washington. Significantly, as Pompeo was in Pyongyang, the US imposed the first round of tariffs aimed against China and, in a highly provocative military move, sent two destroyers through the sensitive Taiwan Strait.

While Pompeo left the negotiations declaring that progress had been made, the North Korean foreign ministry issued a statement that blasted the US for coming up "only with its unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearisation." It described Washington's stance as "deeply regrettable" and "worrisome" and warned that trust between the two sides was now at a "dangerous" stage.

The talks came a month after President Trump met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore, resulting in a brief joint statement expressing a commitment to the "complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula." Trump hailed the Singapore summit on June 12 as a great breakthrough that ended the supposed threat to the US posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons.

The North Korean foreign ministry statement declared that the US demand in the latest talks for “complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation,” or CVID, by Pyongyang, ran “counter to the spirit of the Singapore summit.” It reiterated that “phased, simultaneous actions” were “the quickest way of realizing the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.”

CVID has been the longstanding stance of Washington, signifying that North Korea must not only freeze its nuclear programs, but dismantle all its weapons and facilities, and allow ever more intrusive inspections. As the US demands on Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion demonstrated, there is no end to such an inspection regime, as there is never any way of “proving” that a country has no weapons or the capacity to manufacture them.

Pyongyang and Washington have always interpreted “denuclearisation” differently. Whereas the US has insisted that North Korea dismantle its nuclear programs, North Korea has pointed to the danger it faces from the US military machine, the massive annual joint exercises held by the US and South Korea and the presence of US military forces in South Korea. Above all, Pyongyang has pushed for a peace treaty to formally end the 1950–1953 Korean War and its sustained diplomatic and economic isolation by Washington.

The fact that the Singapore statement made no mention of the CVID led to a barrage of media criticism in Washington accusing Trump of being played by North Korean leader Kim. The pressure was compounded by US reports that North Korea was acting in bad faith by continuing to develop its nuclear facilities—even though no agreement was reached in Singapore to halt such activities.

Pompeo clearly arrived in Pyongyang to lay down an ultimatum—accept US demands in toto or the bellicose threats made by Trump over the past year to “totally destroy” North Korea would be implemented. While Pompeo yesterday dismissed Pyongyang’s condemnation of his “gangster-like” demands, he nevertheless confirmed that the “negotiations” had been completely one-sided, insisting that crippling US and international sanctions would remain in place until North Korea had completely denuclearised.

The North Korean foreign ministry statement explained that its side had proposed dismantling a missile-engine test site and opening negotiations on repatriating the remains of American soldiers killed in the Korean War, in return for “simultaneous” US actions expanding bilateral exchanges and announcing an end to the Korean War. Pompeo had flatly rejected any peace declaration.

“The issues the US side insisted on during the talks were the same cancerous ones that the past US administrations had insisted on,” the ministry said. It noted that while North Korea had taken the irreversible step of destroying its nuclear test site, the US had only suspended joint military exercises with South Korea—a step that could be rapidly reversed. It warned that the US was “fatally mistaken” if it thought that North Korea would accept US “demands reflecting its gangster-like mindset.”

At the same time, Pyongyang made what was in effect a plea to Trump to pull Pompeo into line and abide by the understandings reached in Singapore. In reality, Pompeo was in touch with Trump, his national security adviser John Bolton and other top officials in the course of the latest talks.

Pompeo yesterday flew to Tokyo to brief Japanese and South Korean officials and then to Vietnam, where he painted a glowing picture of what North Korea could expect if it accepted US demands. At a dinner with Vietnamese and American business leaders, he hailed Vietnam’s “incredible rise” due to its engagement with the US and declared that President Trump believed that North Korea could replicate this path. “It’s yours if you’ll seize the moment. The miracle can be yours,” he said.

Unless the Pyongyang regime unconditionally capitulates to its endless demands, Washington has made clear it will not ease the pressure on North Korea. The fact that the Trump administration has just torn up the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran—despite Tehran carrying out all of its terms—is a clear indication that it has no intention of bargaining in good faith.

An ominous warning of what the Trump administration has in mind is the suggestion by Trump’s national security adviser Bolton that the “Libyan model” should be adopted in relation to talks with North Korea. Libya reached an agreement in 2003 to dismantle its nuclear program, but in 2011 the US and its allies attacked the country, in a regime-change operation in which Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was brutally murdered.

As the *New York Times* noted yesterday, “Privately, Mr. Pompeo has said that he doubts the North Korean leader will ever give up his nuclear weapons.” Earlier this year, in his capacity as CIA director, Pompeo was hinting publicly that the US was preparing to assassinate North Korean leader Kim. And the notorious militarist Bolton, prior to his appointment, was advocating the pre-emptive bombing of North Korea.

Whatever the ultimate outcome of US-North Korean talks, the Trump administration is on a course for conflict and war in Asia—with China as the primary target, but also with North Korea if it fails to fall in with US demands.

