

Two Koreas hold talks amid continuing acute tensions

By Peter Symonds
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North and South Korea yesterday held official talks, the first in two years, at Panmunjom in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) that divides the two states. The lengthy discussions resulted in an agreement for Pyongyang to send a sporting team to next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea and for military-to-military talks to seek to lower the risks of miscalculation or accident leading to conflict.

The US State Department welcomed the meeting and indicated that Washington would be interested in joining future talks. "Clearly this is a positive development," spokesman Steve Goldstein declared. "We would like nuclear talks to occur; we want denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. This is a good first step in that process."

North Korea, however, said it has no intention of abandoning its nuclear arsenal, which it regards as the only means for preventing US aggression. Chief North Korean negotiator Ri Son Gwon declared: "All our weapons, including atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs and ballistic missiles are only aimed at the United States, not our brethren [in South Korea], nor China and Russia."

Ri chided his South Korean counterparts for raising the issue of denuclearisation, warning: "This is not a matter between North and South Korea, and to bring up this issue would cause negative consequences and risks turning all of today's good achievement into nothing."

The Pyongyang regime, which confronts crippling UN and American sanctions and the growing threat of US military attack, is clearly seeking to drive a wedge between Washington and South Korea. To enable yesterday's meeting to proceed, South Korean President Moon Jae-in secured an agreement from President Donald Trump to delay major joint military exercises until after the Winter Olympics.

Moon, however, has publicly vowed to take a hard line in any negotiations, telling leaders of the conservative Korean Senior Citizens Association last week he would not be "weak-kneed or just focus on dialogue" and would boost South Korea's military. South Korea remains heavily dependent on the US military alliance, and its armed forces are deeply integrated with those of the United States, which maintains 28,500 troops, and key military bases, in the country.

Nevertheless, Moon was concerned to ease sharp tensions on the Korean Peninsula before the Winter Olympics, which start on February 9 at Pyeongchang, just 80 kilometres south of the DMZ. South Korean officials suggested that the two Olympic teams march together in the opening ceremony, which, if agreed, would be the first time since the 2007 Asian Winter Games in China.

South Korea is seeking to bill the event as the "Peace Olympics." It agreed to pay the expenses of the North Korean team, which will include athletes, officials, a cheer squad, art performers, journalists and spectators. It also indicated a readiness to lift some of its unilateral sanctions on the North to allow the latter's participation.

Any easing of sanctions, however, will be minimal as Washington is insisting there be no breach in its campaign of "maximum pressure" on North Korea. US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert welcomed yesterday's talks, but pointedly added that South Korean officials "will ensure North Korean participation in the Winter Olympics does not violate the sanctions" imposed by the UN and US.

During the 11 hours of talks, South Korean officials called for the renewal of family reunions to coincide with the Lunar New Year in February, but no

agreement was reached. More than 60,000 families were split apart following the post-World War II division of Korea and the 1950–53 Korean War.

Far from ending the dangerous standoff on the Korean Peninsula, the talks have, at most, created a short pause that can quickly and easily break down. US Defence Secretary James Mattis last week played down the significance of delaying the US-South Korean military exercises, saying they would start after the March 9–18 Paralympics.

Trump has repeatedly declared that he will not tolerate North Korea having a nuclear missile able to hit the US and, if necessary, will use military force to prevent it. Over the weekend he bragged that his aggressive stance had led to the talks, just days after threatening North Korea with nuclear annihilation. Trump had tweeted that his “nuclear button” was far bigger than that of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Trump’s reckless and erratic statements underscore sharp divisions within the American political establishment, including the White House, and security apparatus over a war with North Korea that could potentially drag in nuclear-armed powers such as China and Russia. Nevertheless, detailed military plans to attack North Korea have been prepared, and, over the past year, have been rehearsed in large-scale joint exercises, not only with South Korea, but also Japan and other allies.

In its article on the talks, the *New York Times* reported: “The Pentagon has drawn up extensive plans, including a punch-in-the-nose strategy against the North that would involve taking out a missile, and a much broader attack on the missile and nuclear sites. But both Defence Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson have argued internally that it would be nearly impossible to contain any retaliation, officials have said.”

A particularly chilling comment published on the *Foreign Policy* web site argued, as its title indicated, “It’s time to bomb North Korea.” The author, Edward Luttwak, wrote off yesterday’s talks and called for an immediate, unprovoked US attack to destroy North Korea’s nuclear arsenal.

Luttwak dismissed the danger of a retaliatory North Korean attack on the US as “an exaggeration.” He declared, with callous indifference for the lives of millions of people living in Seoul close to the DMZ,

that South Korea had only itself to blame for failing to build bomb shelters. “Given South Korea’s deliberate inaction over many years, any damage ultimately done to Seoul cannot be allowed to paralyse the United States in the face of immense danger to its own national interests,” he wrote.

Luttwak, a prominent analyst with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), is articulating the views of war-mongering sections of the US military and intelligence apparatus. Trump himself, as reported by right-wing Senator Lindsay Graham in August, has expressed similar sentiments.

“If there’s going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong-un], it will be over there,” Graham told NBC. “If thousands die, they’re going to die over there. They are not going to die over here—and he’s told me that to my face.” The senator said this was “inevitable” unless North Korea capitulated completely to US demands to denuclearise. “[Trump] has told me that and I believe him,” he said.

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