

Overtures continue ahead of Trump-North Korea summit

By James Cogan
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Top figures in the Trump administration are continuing to build up expectations that North Korea will submit to US demands for the complete and verifiable destruction of its small arsenal of nuclear weapons. A summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has been scheduled for Singapore on June 12.

On May 10, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a joint press conference with South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha. Pompeo had gone to North Korea last week to finalise the date and venue for the Trump-Kim meeting.

Pompeo reported that he had held “conversations ... about the strategic decision that Chairman Kim has before him ... and if he is prepared, in exchange for the assurances we are ready to provide to him ... to fully denuclearise.”

Pompeo claimed that the US would “work with North Korea to achieve prosperity on the par with our South Korean friends”—suggesting that massive economic assistance would be provided to the isolated and backward state. In 2016, South Korea’s gross domestic product per capita was over \$US27,000. North Korea’s was estimated at barely \$1,000.

“If Chairman Kim chooses the right path, there is a future brimming with peace and prosperity for the North Korean people,” Pompeo asserted. He indicated that the US objective is to bring North Korean regime within its sphere of influence—and heighten strategic and military pressure on China. “We talked about the fact that America has often in history had adversaries who we are now close partners with and our hope that we can achieve the same with respect to North Korea.”

More cautious, but still up-beat, statements were made over the weekend by US Vice President Mike Pence and national security advisor John Bolton.

Pence said Kim Jong-un is “prepared to negotiate to achieve complete denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula. Those words are important, but we’ll see what they mean.”

Bolton said Trump “sees the chance for a breakthrough, but I don’t think he has stars in his eyes.” The US, however, was “prepared to open the trade and investment with North Korea as soon as we can.”

In its own apparent overture, the North Korean regime announced on May 11 that it will invite international media to observe controlled explosions aimed at sealing its main nuclear test site deep in the mountains at Punggye-ri. The shutting down of the facility has been scheduled for May 23–25. The North Korean media has announced the test site is no longer needed, as the country has fully operational nuclear weapons.

Speculation is well underway on the prospect of a rapprochement between the US and North Korea that will open the way for a flood of investment into the north by South Korean and other corporations.

A comment published by Bloomberg News suggested that North Korea would be the “next Vietnam.” After the Vietnamese Stalinist regime restored capitalist relations in 1986, large-scale manufacturing operations were established in the country, with workers paid wages and enduring conditions far worse than even those in China’s free trade zones.

In 2013, North Korea designated 13 areas as “economic development zones” and created a “special economic zone” (SEZ) at Sinuiju on its border with China. Due to tensions over North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests, little investment has materialised. A SEZ already existed at Kaesong on the border with South Korea, but it was shut down in 2016.

The perspective of “reunification” on the Korean Peninsula promoted by both North and South Korea does not mean an end to the separate states or the border between them. The South Korean capitalist class wants to maintain the North Korean military regime intact to preside over the ruthless exploitation of the working class and brutally repress any resistance. In exchange, the ruling clique around Kim Jong-un would be provided wealth, privilege and guarantees of its survival.

The prospect nevertheless remains that the Trump-Kim talks will rapidly break down over the definition of “denuclearisation” and the timeframe for it to be implemented.

North Korea’s key demands are that the US sign a peace treaty to formally end the 1950–53 Korean War—which concluded with only an armistice—and give assurances that it will not militarily threaten North Korea in the future. In the past, Pyongyang has indicated that “denuclearisation” necessarily means the end of the US-South Korean military alliance and the withdrawal of American forces from the peninsula.

Kim has hinted that his regime is prepared to accept American forces remaining, but China will placing immense pressure on North Korea to at least insist on the removal of the US THAAD anti-missile system that was deployed on the pretext of defending South Korea against any North Korean attack. The system, which is also operational in Japan, Hawaii and Guam, is above all targeted at monitoring and nullifying China’s nuclear arsenal.

In the event of war, the THAAD’s purpose is to enable the US to launch a “first strike” and rely on the anti-missile shield to shoot down any Chinese nuclear weapons that survived and were fired in retaliation.

As well as calling for the removal of the THAAD system, North Korea may also insist that “denuclearisation” take place over a protracted number of years, even a decade or more—as a guarantee for its security. Iraq, Libya and Iran all made agreements to disarm, only to face US aggression. In the case of Iraq and Libya, their political leaderships were hunted down and killed.

Former US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, spoke openly last week on the fears in some US ruling circles of the consequences of a breakdown in talks. Addressing an audience at the

Johns Hopkins University, Mullen warned: “If the talks do fall apart, the failure is likely to stir the president’s most bellicose and aggressive instincts. Rhetorically, President Trump has already walked all the way out to the edge of the cliff. There’s not much further he can go.”

The danger, Mullen declared, was that Trump, who is on record “casually threatening a nuclear holocaust over Twitter,” orders a nuclear attack to destroy North Korea’s arsenal.

Mullen stated: “I don’t know if I can fully convey to you how shocking it is to hear the commander-in-chief talk about nuclear weapons with such nonchalance.”

Such concerns reflect the risk of catastrophic unforeseen military and political consequences. It relates to the fact that the Trump administration has staked its domestic credibility on achieving its demands, and any nuclear attack would arouse mass opposition in the US and internationally. Moreover, a confrontation with North Korea could be seized upon to divert and stem the investigations and growing attacks on the White House by its opponents in the Democratic Party and the military-intelligence apparatus.

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