

US and North Korea strike a deal in Singapore

By Ben McGrath
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United States President Donald Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un met this morning in Singapore for the first-ever summit between leaders from the two countries. While it has been touted as step toward peace on the Korean Peninsula, the underlying tensions in the Asia-Pacific will only sharpen, regardless of the reported agreement struck between the pair.

After Kim and Trump signed what the US president called a “pretty comprehensive” document, Trump said he would “absolutely” invite the North Korean leader to Washington. The document was to be released later.

Trump and Kim met at 9:00 a.m. local time, at the luxury Capella Hotel on the island of Sentosa. The Singaporean government turned the site into a virtual militarized zone. The pair held one-on-one talks, with only their interpreters present, for approximately 50 minutes.

Trump had previously threatened to walk out in the first minute of discussions if things did not immediately go Washington’s way. However, after Trump and Kim met and shook hands, the US president stated: “We’re going to have a great discussion, and I think tremendous success. And it’s my honor. We will have a terrific relationship, I have no doubt.”

Kim responded in similar gushing language: “The old fetters and practices worked as obstacles on our way forward, but we’ve overcome all of them and come here today.”

Their positions had apparently not changed after the initial talks, with Trump declaring the two had an “excellent relationship.” They proceeded to discussions involving their respective advisors.

The US delegation included Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, national security advisor John Bolton and Trump’s chief of staff John Kelly. Kelly reportedly

played a lead role in the negotiations in the run-up to the summit.

Kim was joined by North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, Vice-Chairman of International Affairs Ri Su-yong, and Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party Kim Yong-chol, who met Trump in Washington two weeks ago.

Afterwards, the two sides continued talks over a working lunch. Trump was scheduled to speak with reporters around 4 p.m., before leaving for the US at 8 p.m. US media outlets reported that Kim intended to depart Singapore at 2 p.m.

The White House released a short statement saying, in part: “The discussions between the United States and North Korea are ongoing and have moved more quickly than expected.”

Yesterday, Washington’s Sung Kim, former ambassador to South Korea and current envoy to the Philippines, met with the North’s Choe Son-hui, who heads negotiations on US affairs, to finalize the language in a planned joint communiqué. According to information given to the *New York Times* by a US official familiar with the talks, the statement will have three sections, dealing with denuclearization, security guarantees for North Korea, and steps the two sides will take.

Both sides yesterday worked to put a positive spin on the meeting. Trump told Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: “We’ve got a very interesting meeting in particular tomorrow. I think things could work out very nicely.” The US president also had phone calls with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has been concerned about being blindsided by the talks, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Pompeo told reporters the US is “prepared to take what will be security assurances that are different,

unique than...[what] America has been willing to provide previously.” He did not explain further.

North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency said the summit would exchange “wide-ranging and profound views” on building a “permanent and durable peacekeeping mechanism on the Korean Peninsula,” the denuclearization of the peninsula and other issues of “mutual concern,” as “required by the changed era.”

China voiced formal support yesterday for the talks. Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang stated: “China sincerely hopes that the meeting leads to positive results and contributes to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and a political settlement.”

None of this, however, means a peaceful outcome is on the horizon. While all sides called for “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” this has different meanings. Pyongyang and Beijing are likely to demand a reduction in US troops and military hardware in South Korea. For Washington, the aim is to isolate China in preparation for war.

For decades, Washington has used the supposed North Korean threat to ramp up its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Via the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and now Trump’s trade war moves against China, the US has placed financial and military pressure on China, whose development as an economic power is unacceptable to the US.

The Trump administration seems to have given North Korea the option of moving into the United States' orbit or face complete destruction as a first casualty of Washington’s war drive against China.

Pompeo reiterated that “complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the only outcome the United States will ultimately accept.” He emphasized that “the ‘V’ matters,” referring to the acronym CVID, or complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization. “It’s only once the [verification] happens that we will proceed apace,” he said, adding that the crippling sanctions on North Korea would remain in force until that occurs.

South Korea’s Moon Jae-in, speaking from Seoul, commented: “Even after the two leaders have initiated dialogue in a big way, we may need a long process that could take one year, two years or even longer to completely resolve the issues concerned.”

In other words, North Korea will be forced to jump through any number of hoops for an extended period,

depending on Washington’s shifting military and geopolitical demands. Following the 2007 six-party agreement with Pyongyang, Washington unilaterally demanded additional verification measures, sabotaging that deal. The Obama administration abandoned the pact completely as it began its campaign to encircle China. The US could use a similar tactic to renege on any new deal.

Ultimately, if North Korea fails to fall completely in line with Washington’s demands, it risks being annihilated by the United States. If an agreement is reached, it raises the possibility of a pro-US North Korean client state—and potentially even US troops—directly on China’s border. Either outcome will intensify the geo-strategic conflict between Washington and Beijing.

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