

South Korean president in Pyongyang for summit on denuclearization

By Ben McGrath
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South Korean President Moon Jae-in arrived in Pyongyang Tuesday morning for a three-day trip and his third summit with North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong-un. Moon becomes just the third sitting president to visit the North Korean capital after Kim Dae-jung in 2000 and Noh Moo-hyun in 2007. Talks will be held today and Wednesday.

According to Seoul, the summit includes three agenda items: improving inter-Korean relations, promoting US-North Korean talks for denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, and reducing military tensions.

As in the past, Moon has portrayed his trip as one of peace, claiming on Monday that the purpose of the summit was to “remove the tension and possibility of armed conflicts caused by the military confrontation between the South and the North, and to reduce fears of war.”

This will likely include discussions on Moon's call in his August 15 Liberation Day address for economic cooperation. He proposed special economic zones along the North-South border in Gangwon Province and an “East Asia Railroad Community” linking the South with other countries in the region.

However, Moon also stated that he was pushing for Pyongyang to conform with US demands for denuclearization, saying that “a new declaration or agreement between the South and the North is no longer important.”

Moon emphasized his role as mediator for Washington, saying, “Because [denuclearization] is not something we can address ourselves, I plan to hold candid talks with Chairman Kim Jong-un on where we can find an intersecting point between the United States' call for denuclearization steps and the North's demand for corresponding steps to guarantee its security and end the hostile relationship [between the

US and North Korea].”

A contingent of around 200 people joined Moon for the trip. This included Lee Hae-chan, Jeong Dong-yeong, and Lee Jeong-mi, the heads of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, the Peace and Democracy Party, and the Justice Party respectively. All three are from so-called “liberal” parties in the National Assembly while the main opposition Liberty Korea Party and the Bareun Mirae Party, both right wing, were invited but chose not to take part.

In addition, Moon is travelling with a contingent of corporate leaders including Samsung Group Vice Chairman Lee Jae-yong, Hyundai Motors Group Vice Chairman Kim Yong-hwan, SK Chairman Chey Tae-won, and LG Group Chairman Koo Kwang-mo, among others.

That such a large number of business officials are included is indicative of the South Korean bourgeoisie's agenda in North Korea. Whatever Seoul's pretensions, “peace” on the Korean Peninsula means creating the conditions to open North Korea to economic exploitation, as an ultra-cheap labor platform. Genuine reunification, a legitimate desire among Korean workers that would include the ability to travel, work, and live where one chooses, is not on the table.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last week in Vladivostok summed up more succinctly what is in store for North Korea's working class, saying, “North Korea enjoys copper, gold, iron ore, and abundant mineral resources. Its population of 25 million will no doubt become one of the world's leading hardworking labor forces.”

Also in attendance to support these economic plans are the leaders of South Korea's two major trade union groups, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions

(FKTU) and the so-called militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

KCTU leader Kim Myeong-hwan stated on Sunday, “The KCTU will independently participate during this North-South summit in order to realize self-reliant unification and the establishment of a permanent peace. We will emphasize the need for an end-of-war declaration within the year and the suspension of sanctions on North Korea.”

He continued: “We will also demand the removal of all weapons of war including [the US anti-missile] THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense), a product of the war era. We will call for solving the polarization of society through peaceful disarmament for an era of peace and the sweeping expansion of people’s and workers’ welfare.”

The KCTU hopes to convince workers to place their faith in Moon while obscuring the true nature of the talks with Pyongyang. The mass exploitation of North Korean workers will lead to attacks on wages and conditions of workers in South Korea in the name of “remaining competitive.” As it has previously, the KCTU will enforce these attacks on workers in both countries.

The KCTU also hides US war preparations against China. If a peace treaty existed, according to the unions, then there would be no need for US forces in South Korea. However, the KCTU purposely ignores US preparations for war against China and instead lends credibility to the claims that North Korea is the cause of regional instability.

Any declaration formally ending the Korean War would include the US and would cut across Washington’s rationale for maintaining forces in South Korea. That the KCTU believes it can push for “self-reliant unification” or other parochial approaches to inter-Korean relations, while ignoring US military plans, is proof that the unions and their supporters have no interest in waging a genuine anti-war struggle.

War on the Korean Peninsula is also still a reality, especially as US-North Korean negotiations appear to be at an impasse. Washington is demanding North Korea denuclearize before offering any supposed relaxation of sanctions or security guarantees.

It is within this context that the inter-Korean summit takes place. Moon’s offers of economic development are in contrast to threats from Washington, which the

South Korean president will no doubt emphasize to Kim Jong-un. The “olive branch” US President Donald Trump held out to Kim Jong-un at their June 12 summit in Singapore was in effect an ultimatum to Pyongyang: join the US war drive against China or be destroyed.

However, North Korea is not yet prepared to abandon its connections with China as it tries to gain some concessions from Washington. Kim expressed support recently for relations with Beijing, saying, “I will join hands with President Xi Jinping to work actively to further develop the relations and friendship and continue close cooperation.”

In the end, Moon’s summit with Kim or a potential second summit between Kim and Trump will not resolve the issues in East Asia. Regardless of which direction Pyongyang takes, US war plans for China will only intensify, which inevitably involve the Korean Peninsula.

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