

North Korean-US tensions rise as end-of-year deadline approaches

By Peter Symonds
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Efforts by the US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun to meet with senior North Korean officials failed this week, opening up the danger that tensions on the Korean Peninsula could rapidly escalate.

North Korea has set a deadline of the end of the year for the US to engage in meaningful negotiations that would see an easing of crippling American and international sanctions on Pyongyang, in return for its steps towards denuclearisation. The Trump administration has effectively ignored the deadline since it was announced in April.

Biegun, who arrived in South Korea on Sunday for a three-day visit, had been pressing to meet North Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui at Panmunjeom in the demilitarised zone between the two Koreas. However, Pyongyang did not respond to the request, even though Biegun intended to hand over personal messages from Trump to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, a senior South Korean intelligence official told the *Korea Times*.

The US diplomat had made a public appeal on Monday for talks. "It's time for us to do our jobs. Let's get this done. We are here. And you know how to reach us," he told reporters. Biegun declared it was "regrettable" that recent North Korean statements towards the US were "so hostile and negative" and that its weapons tests were "most unhelpful."

At the same time, however, Biegun dismissed the North Korean deadline, saying: "The United States does not have a deadline. We have a goal." He continued: "We have offered any number of creative ways to proceed with feasible steps and flexibility in our negotiations to reach balanced agreements that meet the objectives of both sides."

In reality, the US has the most to gain by stringing

out negotiations that began with the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in June 2018 where they agreed in general terms to denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. All of the punitive sanctions remain in place that severely limit North Korea's imports and exports, while the US has simply suspended major joint military exercises with South Korea.

Despite Biegun's claims that the US is offering to be flexible, it has not dropped its insistence that North Korea must dismantle its nuclear arsenal and production facilities before any easing of sanctions takes place. Washington has also rejected Pyongyang's proposal that the two countries begin negotiations to formally end the 1950–53 Korean War that concluded with an armistice, but not a peace treaty.

Washington's refusal to grant any economic relief effectively ensured that the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February broke down. A brief meeting between Trump and Kim in the demilitarised zone in June and talks in Sweden in October between Biegun and North Korean diplomat Kim Myong-gil failed to break the deadlock.

The Trump administration this week also rejected a proposal by Russia and China to ease sanctions on North Korea as a means of easing rising tensions. A draft resolution to be put in the UN Security Council would lift a ban on North Korean exports of seafood, textiles and statues. It would also lift a ban on North Koreans working abroad and end the requirement for all such workers to be repatriated to North Korea by next week.

These measures would give a much-needed boost to the North Korean economy. Seafood exports were worth nearly \$US300 million in 2017 while textiles contributed more than \$750 million. Foreign currency earnings from the tens of thousands of North Koreans

working abroad, mainly in Russia and China, are significantly larger, with estimates ranging from \$1.2 billion to \$2.3 billion a year.

During a UN Security Council meeting last week on North Korea, China's ambassador to the UN, Zhang Jun, called for sanctions to be adjusted to prevent "a dramatic reversal" of the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

On Monday, however, a US State Department official accused North Korea of "threatening to conduct an escalated provocation" and declared that now was not the time to lift UN sanctions. The US could veto the draft resolution if China and Russia ever tabled it in the UN Security Council.

China in particular is seeking prevent the slide towards a conflict on its northern border that could draw it into a war with the US. Beijing has placed pressure on its ally, North Korea, to enter negotiations with Washington. At the same time, however, it is concerned that the US is seeking to make a deal to draw Pyongyang towards Washington as part of US efforts to encircle and undermine China.

In the absence of any sanctions' relief, Pyongyang is threatening to resume its full testing program, with a senior North Korean official suggesting that it will give the US a "Christmas gift." While it has continued some missile testing, it has refrained from conducting another nuclear test or launching a long-range missile since November 2017, which Trump has seized on to claim a major diplomatic win.

Last Friday, North Korea conducted what it described as "another crucial test" at its Sohae satellite launching ground. The test is likely to have been a static engine test involving the engine for a ballistic missile—the second such test this month.

The US administration has expressed concern that North Korea could carry out a major test. Trump declared earlier this week that "we're watching it very closely," adding: "I'd be disappointed if something would be in the works. And if it is, we'll take care of it."

The US president has recently resorted to the provocative language he previously used, again describing the North Korean leader as "rocket man". In 2017, speaking in the United Nations, Trump declared he would "totally destroy" North Korea if it threatened the United States.

The refusal of the US to make any significant concessions to North Korea or even to acknowledge its end-of-year deadline could rapidly lead to a return of the hair trigger standoff of two years ago that threatened to drag the region into a catastrophic war.

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