

# As Talks Between Washington And Pyongyang Stall, Fears Over The Breakdown Of North Korea's Denuclearization Process Rise

This past week, North Korean official Kim Yong-chol abruptly cancelled a planned meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for this Thursday. As both countries seek to reconcile their differences and pursue détente, the latest developments in the bilateral relationship pose deep challenges for maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Despite efforts in reducing tensions between the two countries, recent developments have impeded this progress. Pyongyang has recently threatened to restart its nuclear program this past weekend and has criticized continuing U.S. sanctions against the country, while the United States continues to participate in joint military exercises with South Korea.

In response to this cancelling and expected postponement of the meeting, President Donald Trump said at a press conference, "We are going to make it...another day. But we're very happy with how it's going with North Korea. We think it's going fine. We're in no rush." U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert has said in a statement that Secretary Pompeo's meeting with Kim Jong-un "will now take place at a later date," they will reconvene "when their respective schedules permit," and "ongoing conversations continue to take place." An official from the South Korean Foreign Ministry has cautioned against reading too much in the postponement of the meeting: "[The postponement] should be seen as part of the process of achieving complete denuclearization and establishing a peace regime. We [South Korea] will continue to play our role to continue the momentum of dialogue."

Analysts of the issue generally appear unsurprised by the announcement from North Korea. Terence Roehrig, professor of national security at the U.S. Naval War College, has told *United Press International* that it is not a surprise that there has been little progress on denuclearization. He has said, "I remain skeptical North Korea is going to be willing to give up its nuclear weapons."

Bruce Bennett, a senior defense researcher at the RAND Corporation, told *UPI* that the North Korean leader seems to be doing whatever he pleases while continuing to engage with the United States and South Korea. According to Woo Jung-yeop, a research fellow at the Sejong Institute, the postponing of the meeting signals that North Korea is not willing to meet the U.S.' expectations.

While the rhetoric exchanged between the United States and North Korea is nothing like the sort of "fire and fury" of a year ago, there is a deep risk that both leaders could return to the bellicosity that threatened a nuclear escalation. A major obstacle to continuing progress in talks between Pyongyang and Washington has been growing tensions between the United States and China. With China as North Korea's closest ally, China plays an important role in guiding North Korean foreign policy. However, as tensions increase between Beijing and Washington over trade and military dispositions, vis-à-vis the South China Sea and Taiwan, China's continued support for U.S. diplomacy with North Korea will remain limited. President Trump himself has argued that the lack of progress in talks has been due to China's "considerable aid" to North Korea and the United States' position that China has been bypassing sanctions on North Korea.

In terms of North Korean actions, Pyongyang has itself done little to de-escalate tensions. Though Kim Jong-un jointly signed the Panmunjom Declaration with his South Korean counterpart in April of this year, and there have been other various efforts to pursue closer ties between the two Koreas, there have been few signs of demonstrative progress. In a September article by the Japanese newspaper *The Nikkei*, a recent report of the International Atomic Energy Agency has noted North Korea's "continuation and further development" of its nuclear programs. Meanwhile, international efforts in pushing for North Korea's denuclearization have failed thus far. While it is understandable that North Korea remains largely protective of its strongest asset in defending its sovereignty, it needs to be more transparent in priorities and what sort of results it expects from dialogue with the United States.

To resolve these issues, it is imperative that South Korea under President Moon Jae-in continues to maintain its central diplomatic role. While the South Korean President is losing support on domestic issues, after his summit with Kim Jong-un in September his approval rating rose to 61 percent, according to Gallup Korea; according to Realmeter, 71.6 percent of respondents backed the outcomes of the summit. Thus, with a South Korean public largely supporting his diplomatic

efforts, President Moon certainly has the domestic legitimacy and support in order to pursue his diplomatic activities, vis-à-vis North Korea. While the South Korean leader has to play a balancing act between Pyongyang and Washington, there is perhaps no better leader guide the agenda of de-escalation.

Other efforts that may be promising are Russia's request to China that it schedule a closed-door meeting of the United Nations Security Council for Thursday to discuss North Korea and advocate for an easing of U.N. sanctions as part of a denuclearization accord. On Friday, Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mattis are due to meet their Chinese counterparts at the second U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, offering another venue with which to discuss North Korea.

As relations between Washington and Tehran sour, especially after the re-imposing of sanctions, it is vital that relations between Washington and Pyongyang do not reach such a state. With political tensions already at a high concerning the South China Sea, any further increase in hostilities in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific would pose deep challenges not only for the region, but for the world. With much of the world's economy centered on China, South Korea, Japan, and the United States, stability in the Asia-Pacific would bolster security elsewhere. This postponement will hopefully be just a delay in ongoing talks and not a sign of a return to the hawkishness of 2017.

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Source: <http://theowp.org/as-talks-between-washington-and-pyongyang-stall-fears-over-the-breakdown-of-north-koreas-denuclearization-process-rise/>

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