

Towards Another US-North Korea Summit?

Onus on the South Korean President to Push Sanctions Relief after Summit

By [Stuart Smallwood](#)

Global Research, January 27, 2019

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [NORTH KOREA](#)

News of another summit between the US and North Korean heads of state is surely encouraging for advocates of Korean peace. Hopes are high that North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un has an inkling the Trump administration will budge from its commitment to “maximum pressure” – the threat of invading North Korea and economic sanctions causing [widespread starvation](#) among its citizens – to have even agreed to a second summit in the first place.

Yet President Trump already confirmed during his press conference announcing the summit on January 19th that he intends to [maintain the full catalogue of sanctions](#) until North Korea’s complete denuclearization. So it appears an [end-of-war declaration](#) is the most that can be expected of these talks. At a minimum the two leaders must produce a concrete framework and timeline for peace that is not contingent on North Korea’s denuclearization for their meeting to be a development on the initial summit in Singapore last June.

Still, much skepticism is in order. After all, it took just a month for the Trump administration to flip the script of the [Singapore agreement](#) and begin demanding North Korea initiate denuclearization prior to a peace deal – a nonstarter for Kim Jong-un’s government and [the reason](#) US-NK diplomacy has been stalled ever since.

Even with a peace deal in place, the Trump administration will still want the North Korean government to go out on a very precarious limb to achieve the initial steps of nuclear disarmament. Washington [has requested](#) a complete declaration of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal – including the location of these weapons and intrusive inspections – to confirm nothing is being hidden. This will expose North Korea’s nuclear weapons to a possible preemptive attack by the US.

While such an attack may seem unlikely, it is not so outlandish from the perspective of a country [completely destroyed](#) by the US during the Korean War and subject to decades of invasion drills just off their coast by the American and South Korean militaries (sometimes to [seize](#) nuclear weapons). Not only a declaration of peace, but an [ironclad security guarantee](#) backed by other stakeholders in the region will be necessary for North Korea to take that risk. This is something China, Russia and South Korea could take part in.

Still, peace and security is one thing; the purpose of nuclear weapons as a trade chip is another. Pyongyang has always sought a give-and-take approach – gradual removal of sanctions for each denuclearization step. North Korea will never commit to a lengthy (years-long) process of disarmament that is destined to remain incomplete prior to the next US presidential election (and likely transition to an even [more hostile](#) Democratic

administration) without any reciprocal sanctions relief along the way.

Kim [said so himself](#) during his national address on New Year's Day when he warned that his government would have "...no option but to explore a new path in order to protect our sovereignty [if the US] continues to break its promises and misjudges our patience by unilaterally demanding certain things and pushes ahead with sanctions and pressure."

If some form of a peace deal is born of the next summit, it will be a huge success. But the prospects of denuclearization will remain remote if the US does not eventually relent on gradual sanctions relief. Given the ideological commitment to sanctions pervading imperial Washington, it will take nothing more than a complete come-to-Jesus moment by the Trump administration, including longtime [North Korean regime change advocate](#) National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#) (he of [undue influence](#) in the White House), to overcome this unbridgeable gap.

While observers can be allowed some measure of optimism based on the summit announcement, South Korean President Moon Jae-in – [the prime mover](#) of the peace process from the beginning – cannot afford to wait much longer for the Trump administration to see the light on sanctions.

At stake for South Korea is the unfettered inter-Korean economic exchange needed for lasting peace on the peninsula and to pump life into its [stagnating economy](#). The South Korean president has explicitly stated what he believes must happen to get to this point.

"North Korea knows it needs (to take) clear denuclearization steps to see international sanctions lifted and the United States also realizes that reciprocal measures are needed to match these North Korean denuclearization steps," [he said](#) during a televised news conference on January 10th.

Yet President Moon is also aware that North Korea will never take the initiative on denuclearization without a [security guarantee](#), which is why he has been [calling on the US](#) to agree to formally end the Korean War – so far [to no avail](#). If the upcoming summit can produce the latter, perhaps Moon can move on to convincing Washington about sanctions relief.

This may require a lot more than lobbying. Despite the initial positivity that came out of Singapore, US sanctions have actually [increased](#) since, President Moon's efforts notwithstanding. This stands in stark contrast to the [great strides](#) the two Koreas have made toward diplomatic and [military reconciliation](#) over that time, sometimes [to the chagrin](#) of Trump administration officials.

The path of least resistance for Moon to achieve peace has always been through the participation of Washington given the barrier of US-led sanctions and the fact he is president of a country that has been deeply linked to America politically, economically and militarily since the era of the [US occupational government](#) following World War II. However, the deadline for South Korean patience is drawing near. As a [single term](#) president with three years remaining in his tenure, Moon cannot afford to waste another six months waiting for an unlikely epiphany among policymakers in Washington. If the Trump administration fails to produce anything positive from the next summit in the short term or if it later becomes

evident the US will never relent on gradual sanctions relief, the time for Moon to contemplate violating sanctions will be at hand.

An Alternative Path for Kim's Economic Modernization

For his part, Kim Jong-un made it clear in his aforementioned address on January 1st that North Korea will not wait on the US forever. While the majority of his speech detailed [his mission for reforming the North Korean economy](#), Kim also addressed the peace process and denuclearization – two issues that are fundamentally linked to attracting direct foreign investment for this economic reform.

Kim called for Koreans alone to be the masters of the peace process, stating that inter-Korean diplomacy, dissolution of military tensions, and economic cooperation should move forward regardless of outside influence (a clear reference to the United States). He also reiterated his commitment to denuclearization, as long as Washington accedes to reciprocity in the process, and reaffirmed his moratorium on the use and testing of nuclear weapons.

His much-publicized warning that his country would take an alternative approach if the US maintains maximum pressure was largely received by Western media as a threat to rekindle the tensions of yesteryear by [refocusing on nuclear development](#). This only makes sense when taken completely out of the context of a speech devoted chiefly to economic reforms. North Korea's standing in the world, in particular [with China](#), Russia and South Korea, has improved as a direct result of Kim's diplomatic initiatives and moratorium on nuclear testing. Going backward would mean alienating the very countries he is courting for investment.

A more likely explanation is that the North Korean leader was alluding to the existence of other partners in the region that can still support his economic ambitions if his diplomacy with Washington breaks down through no fault of his own. Indeed, he followed up his speech with a [visit to Beijing](#) just seven days later, another reminder to Washington that it's not all about the US.

China and Russia have been vocal in their support for Kim Jong-un during this peace process and have [openly called](#) for sanctions to be relaxed in return for North Korean steps toward denuclearization. There is plenty of evidence that China is already ignoring [sanctions outright](#), though not on the massive scale that Kim no doubt hopes for one day. This means the sanctions element of maximum pressure [already exists in name only](#) and China has the advantage of first access to North Korea's economy.

At the same time, Washington has inadvertently [created a scaffold](#) for an [alternative global economic system](#) through its trade war with China and aggressive use of sanctions against [Russia](#) and [Iran](#), one that North Korea may be able to integrate with whether the US government likes it or not. China has dramatically [reduced](#) investment in the US (down more than eighty percent [this year alone](#)) while its [economic and military](#) ties with Russia strengthen. It is also being disincentivized from further financial integration with American satellite states after the arrest of representatives from telecom giant Huawei in Canada and Poland for violating arbitrary [Iranian sanctions](#) (that were [supposed to have been removed](#) after President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran).

China will no doubt avoid flagrantly advertising deepening economic relations with North

Korea, but with each passing day it has less reason to avoid doing so as it searches for alternative markets to park its investment capital. At the same time, Russia and Iran have already been heavily sanctioned – perhaps beyond further meaningful sanctioning – and may not be reliably penalized for trading with North Korea. Both countries could serve as crucial fuel sources as Kim pursues economic development.

While Kim is clearly staking his own domestic reputation and legacy on [economic modernization](#) rather than the past focus on shows of military prowess, it is still uncertain what denuclearization requirements the Chinese and Russian governments will have before deepening economic ties with North Korea. Also yet to be determined is whether South Korea, barred by sanctions, will stand by and watch as China takes advantage of North Korea's attempted economic opening.

South Korea's Choice: Settling for Reduced Military Tensions or Pursuing Lasting Peace

Imagine two countries (of the same nationality, no less) that have built railways right up to their respective borders yet cannot properly link them – despite obvious mutual economic interest and dramatic steps toward peaceful coexistence in the last year – because another country on the opposite side of the world disapproves.

The railway linking South Korea to the North – and to China, Russia and the rest of the Asian continent – is not only a symbol for the entire peace process, but a [major economic incentive](#) for all stakeholders in the region. Though technically connected, its state of disrepair is a metaphor for a divided nation and a stalled peace process.

South Korea was in essence made an artificial island off the mainland of Northeast Asia with the division of the peninsula after World War II. Simply by upgrading the North Korean railway system and resuming regular passage between the two Koreas, the South could suddenly – as if by magic – reconnect to the Eurasian landmass. The boon this would represent for trade should not be underestimated and President Moon clearly views the potential economic benefits of peace as the stimulus needed to revive South Korea's flagging economy. None of this is possible as long as South Korea respects the sanctions regime.

During his January 10th press conference, Moon [spoke](#) of the need to act quickly once sanctions are removed.

“Investors from China and around the world may end up scrambling to enter North Korea to gain the advantage there. It is crucially important that South Korea not miss its window of opportunity.” He added, “At a time when the South Korean economy is facing structural difficulties and cannot achieve the kind of high-speed growth it experienced in the past, I believe that inter-Korean economic cooperation will become a new and historic growth driver contributing new vitality to our economy.”

But what if sanctions are never lifted by the United States? South Korea will run the serious risk of being left behind if it continues to wait for the Trump administration to first accept the need for gradual sanctions relief and then deliver on that promise. Sanctions were never meaningfully lifted for Iran despite being a condition of Obama's nuclear agreement and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – the same man in charge of North Korean diplomacy [all this time](#) – recently [admitted](#) the aim of Iran sanctions is in fact regime change. President Moon must seriously consider the possibility that “maximum pressure” is not really meant to

induce denuclearization at all (it's not as if most North Korean sanctions were designed to engineer the [isolation and eventual collapse](#) of North Korea, or anything).

No matter what comes out of this second Trump-Kim summit, it is hard to be optimistic Washington will voluntarily deliver sanctions relief given the US Empire's [history of duplicity](#), the ideological bent of significant members of Trump's own administration, and the [fundamental opposition](#) to peace in the US media and among the Democratic opposition. South Korea must force Washington's hand by putting the US in a position to lose something – finally making them a stakeholder in the peace process.

People Power Can Make the Difference in Korea

The [roots of Korean peace](#) extend to the people of South Korea, who – through a nonviolent mass movement known as the Candlelight Revolution – rose up and ousted the corrupt right-wing and pro-war government of Park Geun-hye to elect a peace-oriented president willing to push inter-Korean diplomacy regardless of the mood in Washington. The North and South Korean governments' commitment to the peace process then forced a reluctant Trump administration to the table.

This is the model President Moon will have to employ once again when President Trump – a man with a notoriously undisciplined mind who is beset by domestic controversy and myriad other foreign policy concerns – proves unwilling or incapable of doing what needs to be done to convince North Korea to denuclearize.

By violating sanctions (and what would be more impactful and symbolic than upgrading the railway connecting the two Koreas?) the South Korean president can force Washington to make a choice: whether to completely alienate its ally and host to 23,000-plus American military personnel by punishing it economically, or stand down, permit reciprocal sanctions relief for denuclearization progress and thereby allow the Korean peace process to carry forward to its ultimate conclusion.

If the US government chooses punishment and continued obstruction, a surprise may be in store. The South Korean people have already shown what they are capable of achieving through the Candlelight Revolution. The moment the US begins to penalize South Korea for sanctions violations will be the point it becomes starkly clear to Koreans and the rest of the world that America is the single obstacle preventing their reconciliation and the economic benefits true peace will bring. This could spur the South Korean people to demand an end to the military alliance and eventually force the US to withdraw troops from the country.

So let us applaud the news of an upcoming summit between the US and North Korea, but do so with an understanding that the empire may never honestly approach denuclearization negotiations until it has something to lose if the process fails. Korean peace must be founded on unbound economic exchange, and President Moon must let it be known that this peace – not perpetual war – is the only way the US can retain its alliance with South Korea.

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This article was originally published on [Antiwar.com](#).

Stu Smallwood is a Korean-English translator currently based in Montreal, Canada. He lived in South Korea for eight years from 2008-2016 and has a (useless) MA in Asian Studies from Sejong University in Seoul. In addition to Antiwar.com, his writing has appeared at [Global Research](http://GlobalResearch) and the Hankyoreh. He can be reached by email at [stuartsmallwood\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:stuartsmallwood[at]gmail.com) or through his Twitter handle [@stu-smallwood](https://twitter.com/stu-smallwood).

Featured image: South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un embrace each other after releasing a joint statement at the truce village of Panmunjeom, Friday. / Korea Summit Press Pool

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