

South Korean president's visit to North: Moon and Kim hail 'leap forward'

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‘Dream come true’ for Moon as Korean leaders make mountain pilgrimage

South Korean president's visit to North concludes with highly symbolic trip to Mount Paektu.

Moon Jae-in, the South Korean president, stepped into the shallow waters of Heaven Lake, regarded as the spiritual home of the Korean people, bent down and scooped up a glassful of water.

Kim Jong-un, his North Korean counterpart, watched from a distance. Moon was fulfilling a long-held dream to visit Mount Paektu, which straddles the border between North Korea and China. At the summit the two men held hands and thrust them into the air as they posed for a photo with their wives, the lake in the background.

The highly symbolic trip capped a three-day visit by Moon to North Korea, the first by a South Korean leader in 11 years. After two days of talks, Kim pledged to close a missile testing site that was crucial to North Korea's development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, and offered to shut the country's only known nuclear complex in exchanged for unspecified "reciprocal measures" from the US.

Observers said these measure fell short of expectations in Washington. But inter-Korean relations continue to grow closer, and the trip to Paektu highlighted the close relationship between the two leaders.

Kim hopes to restart negotiations with the US, and hopes to have a second summit with Donald Trump as soon as possible, Moon told reporters when he returned to Seoul. Kim also invited secretary of state Mike Pompeo to Pyongyang, Moon said.

"Chairman Kim expressed his wish to finish complete denuclearization at an early date and focus on economic development," Moon said, adding that details would have to be worked out between North Koreans and the US.

But US officials have made little progress with the most basic of discussions, such as having North Korea provide an inventory of its nuclear which would become the basis for future talks. Moon said North Korea is ready to accelerate the denuclearisation process, but only if the US makes reciprocal measures, which have not been defined.

If negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang continue to hit roadblocks, it could jeopardise inter-Korean exchanges since sanctions will likely remain in place. It did not stop Kim from trying to win over the South Korean president, sending him two tons of pine mushrooms, a delicacy.

Moon is an avid hiker and during his first meeting with Kim, in April, he had expressed his desire to visit the mountain, the highest on the Korean peninsula at 2,500 metres (9,000ft).

"I have a dream that I have not been able to fulfil for a long time, which is trekking Mount Paektu," Moon said at the time. "I believe Chairman Kim will make that dream come true for sure."

The trip to the summit on a sunny morning was less of a trek than a photo op. Both Kim and Moon wore black overcoats and black leather dress shoes, and they travelled to the top by cable car. Outings like this have helped build trust between the two men, something Kim still lacks in his relationship with Trump.

The mountain is featured heavily in North Korean propaganda, and Kim has made trips to its summit after nuclear tests or major announcements, most recently when he declared the country's nuclear arsenal complete. North Korea's two previous leaders, Kim's grandfather and father, are said to have been born in its shadow. This has been used to bolster the Kim family's claim to a sacred bloodline, though the account has been disputed by some.

Paektu is also a significant symbol in the South, where it is mentioned in the country's national anthem. Although Moon could have visited the summit sooner from the Chinese side, he had wanted to go by "stepping on our soil", Kim Eui-kyeom, a South Korean presidential spokesman, said at a briefing.

Moon was scheduled to fly back to Seoul on Thursday afternoon and he will meet Trump in New York next week during the UN general assembly, and Moon said he has a private message from Kim to deliver. The US has invited North Korea's foreign minister to meet the secretary of state next week in an attempt to restart talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

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North Korea agrees to shut down missile test sites as leaders hail 'leap forward'

Moon Jae-in says leaders have agreed to steps they say will lead to a nuclear-free

peninsula, and Kim pledges to visit Seoul.

North Korea will shut down key missile test facilities in the presence of “international experts” and is willing to close its only known nuclear complex if the United States makes reciprocal measures, South Korean president Moon Jae-in has announced in a joint press conference with Kim Jong-un.

The two leaders also agreed during a three-day summit in Pyongyang to connect two rail lines, on the east and west side of the peninsula, across one of the most militarised borders in the world. Kim also said he would visit Seoul in the “near future”, a move that would make him the first North Korean leader to visit the South’s capital.

North and South Korea agreed that the Korean Peninsula should turn into a “land of peace without nuclear weapons and nuclear threats”, Moon said. Any transport links would require the approval of the US-led United Nations Command, which oversees the border region.

“There is not only going to be a smooth road ahead, there will be challenges and trials, but the more we overcome them the stronger we will become,” Kim said. “We are not afraid of future challenges.”

The agreement signed in Pyongyang “will open a higher level for the improvement in relations” between the two Koreas, Kim added, describing it as a “leap forward” toward peace.

Donald Trump described the meeting as “Very exciting!” in a tweet, and claimed Kim had “agreed to allow nuclear inspections, subject to final negotiations”.

He later said US relations with North Korea were much improved since he took office. “We’re making tremendous progress with respect to North Korea. Prior to becoming president, it looked like we were going to war with North Korea and now we have a lot of progress,” he told journalists at the White House.

“A lot of tremendous things but very importantly no missile testing, no nuclear testing.”

Under the agreement signed by the men, North Korea will shut down the Dongchang-ri missile engine testing facility and missile launch pad, according to Moon. It was not immediately clear what North Korea meant by “reciprocal measures” the US could take so that it would shut its nuclear complex, but it is unlikely Washington would agree to give up any part of its own nuclear arsenal.

Handshakes and high hopes: the inter-Korean summit – in pictures

Kim did not mention denuclearisation at any point in his own remarks. The lack of steps specifically on the nuclear issue could worry officials in Washington, and talks between the US and North Korea have stalled in recent weeks.

Mintaro Oba, a former US diplomat who focused on North Korea policy, said: “I think we can expect a two-tiered response where President Trump remains enthusiastic about engaging with Kim Jong-un, but we also see continued scepticism from US officials about both the purported progress on denuclearisation.

“But if one thing is clear, it’s that North Korea continues to outmanoeuvre the United States through its willingness to take initiatives that shape the global public narrative and force Washington to choose between engaging on Pyongyang’s terms or looking like it is acting in bad faith.”

The two Koreas also agreed to establish a joint military committee to resolve any potential conflicts, and each side will withdrawal 11 guard post from the demilitarised zone by the end of the year. The two militaries agreed to a range of measures to prevent accidental clashes, including a no-fly zone

near the border and suspending test firing in the area.

South Korea will allow its citizens to visit the Mount Kumgang tourist region in the North for the first time since 2008, when a North Korean soldier shot and killed a tourist from the South. The two sides will also establish a permanent venue for families divided by the 1950-53 Korean war to meet more frequently. In the past most families could see relatives for only a few hours, and usually only once.

The two sides also plan to bid to jointly host the 2032 Summer Olympics.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/19/north-korea-shut-missile-test-summit-kim-jong-un-moon>

US wants to restart nuclear talks with Pyongyang after North-South summit

Trump hails ‘tremendous progress’ as analysts warn the two leaders have different ideas of what denuclearization entails.

The US has said it is ready to “immediately” restart stalled negotiations with North Korea about nuclear disarmament in light of agreements reached at a summit of the two Koreas in Pyongyang.

At that meeting, the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, promised to dismantle a missile engine test site and launchpad, and made a conditional offer to shut down his country’s main nuclear complex at Yongbyon.

The secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, said on Wednesday he had invited his North Korean counterpart, Ri Yong-ho, to meet in New York next week where both diplomats will be attending the UN general assembly. Other North Korean officials have been asked to meet US special envoy, Stephen Biegun, in Vienna.

Donald Trump also welcomed this week’s Pyongyang meeting between Kim and the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in. “We’re making tremendous progress with respect to North Korea,” Trump told reporters, adding: “We have a lot of very good things going.”

In a written statement, Pompeo said: “This will mark the beginning of negotiations to transform US-DPRK relations through the process of rapid denuclearization of North Korea, to be completed by January 2021, as committed by Chairman Kim, and to construct a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula.”

A day after their joint address, Moon and Kim headed out for a visit to the symbolic home of the Korean people, Mt Paektu, which sits on North Korea’s border with China. Travelling to Mt Paektu has been a long-held dream for Moon, who is an avid hiker and has previously trekked in the Himalayas.

The mountain is a key piece in North Korean propaganda, and the official biographies of the country's founder and its second leader – Kim's grandfather and father – say they were both born in the shadow of the mountain, bolstering their claim to the leadership. The mountain is also mentioned in South Korea's national anthem and it features prominently in traditional Korean art.

Since Trump declared North Korea "no longer a nuclear threat" following his own summit with Kim in Singapore in June, progress in disarmament negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang has stalled, as it has become clear the two leaders had very different conceptions of what the process would entail.

Observers noted on Wednesday that Pompeo was similarly exaggerating what Kim had agreed on Tuesday in Pyongyang.

In a joint declaration, it was agreed that the two sides would "cooperate closely in the process of pursuing complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula".

For Pyongyang, the phrase signifies a phased process of mutual confidence building and arms control that would involve significant US concessions, not unilateral disarmament by Pyongyang. There was no mention of a deadline, as Pompeo had claimed.

At his summit this week with Moon, Kim agreed to complete the dismantlement of a missile engine test and launch site in the north-west of the country, something he had previously offered to do in Singapore.

The secretary of state also noted that Kim had undertaken to dismantle facilities at Yongbyon "in the presence of US and IAEA inspectors".

That would be a more dramatic step, although one that Pyongyang has partly carried out before, blowing up a reactor cooling tower 10 years ago. However, in the joint declaration in Pyongyang, Kim did not mention inspectors and made the offer to dismantle Yongbyon contingent on the US taking "corresponding measures". He did not make clear what those measures should be.

"The North Koreans want reciprocal action. What is that reciprocal action? They don't specify so we don't know," said Sue Mi Terry, a former senior CIA Korea analyst now at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. "It is more than a peace declaration – a peace treaty, we have a problem."

She added: "I don't think this really moves the ball forward. The different definitions of denuclearization are still there."

When asked about what concessions the US might make to North Korea, Trump replied: "Well, we'll see what he's looking at. We'll see. But in the meantime, we're talking. It's very calm. He's calm, I'm calm. So we'll see what happens."

Jung Pak, another former US intelligence official, noted the Pyongyang declaration had come on the anniversary of a 2005 multilateral agreement in which North Korea had "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs".

"We should recognise that 13 years ago they agreed to far bigger concessions," said Pak, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "Kim is trying to turn back the clock and set the terms of what he is willing to talk about. These are minuscule moves on Kim's part and we should treat them accordingly."

In contrast to the vague undertaking on denuclearization, the military annex to the Pyongyang

declarations included very detailed steps both North and South Korea are to take to reduce the chance of any unintended border incident escalating into war.

Areas around the demilitarised zone separating the two Koreas are to be declared no-fly zones, the defence forces of both sides are to follow multi-step protocols to defuse border incidents, and guard posts along the DMZ are to be withdrawn.

“Lessening the danger of a conventional military confrontation, which could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons is essential,” said Joel Wit, a former state department official and senior fellow at the Stimson Centre thinktank. “The agreement reached at the Moon-Kim summit, which begins to move away from 60 years of confrontation since the Korean war, is a first step in that direction.”

Kim and Moon also agreed on measures to revive economic cooperation, which could run afoul of Washington’s efforts to maintain sanctions on North Korea.

“The 600lb gorilla in the room is sanctions,” Victor Cha, a former director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council. “South Korea is promising all of these goodies to the North but can’t do any of it with sanctions in place. The subtext is clear: Seoul is going to approach the US to lift sanctions so it can pursue the inter-Korean peace, but the sanctions are on the regime for denuclearization and human rights abuses. Crossed lines that look like we are headed for a train wreck.”

Cha said the progress in Pyongyang towards denuclearization was minimal. “Trump is praising it all which is astounding to me. You have a president taking credit for things that have not yet happened [denuclearization] and a DPRK leader agreeing to do what he has already done with the South Koreans applauding it as new.”

Joseph Yun, a former US special envoy on North Korea, said that while vague and conditional, Kim’s offer to dismantle Yongbyon at least offered a route out of the current impasse in nuclear negotiations.

“It opens the door a little bit,” said Yun, now a senior adviser at the US Institute of Peace. “It could be the beginning of a process. I would very much hope that Washington would respond constructively to this opening.”

Julian Borger in Washington

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North and South Korea Take Important Steps to Demilitarize the Korean Peninsula

At yesterday’s summit meeting in Pyongyang between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the defense ministers of the two countries signed an important agreement to reduce military tensions along the two sides’ heavily militarized border. As of

November 1, no-fly zones will be established along the border and both sides will halt artillery and other military drills close to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two countries. The North and South also agreed to dismantle several of the heavily armed guard posts they have each constructed inside the DMZ and to create a maritime peace zone in the West Sea (Yellow Sea).

These military confidence building measures (CBMs), and others that are under discussion to reduce border tensions and build mutual trust, such as banning the entry of warships and live-fire exercises around the Northern Limit Line (NLL), are historically significant and lay a solid foundation for more far-reaching measures to reduce the risk of a surprise attack or inadvertent conflict. The US and the rest of the world have been fixated on North Korea's denuclearization—and the agreements that were announced yesterday on denuclearization have garnered most of today's headlines. But a "bolt out of the blue" North Korean nuclear attack on the United States, which would be suicidal for the Kim dynasty and his country, has always been a fantastical scenario. The most likely trigger for any large-scale conventional conflict between North Korea and US/ROK forces has always been a local incident or accident that escalates out of control.

Further mitigating these risks, which reflects the shared commitment of both leaders to completely remove the threat of armed conflict and the fear of war from the Korean Peninsula, should continue to be a high priority for North and South Korea as well as for the United States. Indeed, it is hard to visualize a sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula that does not reduce the North's conventional military threat to South Korea or include new mechanisms to deter and manage crises and prevent or control escalation of a conflict. The CBMs that were announced yesterday were positive steps in this direction, and it is noteworthy that they will actually constrain military operations on both sides and not just provide greater transparency about these activities. The Trump administration should encourage Moon and Kim to continue down this path independent of progress toward denuclearization or a new peace treaty for the peninsula to replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement.

The two countries should also eventually set their sights higher to make the peninsula, in their words, a "land of peace." Given the great wall of mistrust that Moon and Kim are attempting to tear down and the still fragile North-South relationship, the two leaders are right to adopt an incremental, step-by-step approach to CBMs and not burden their dialogue with unrealistic ambitions. But as the mutual mistrust melts and both countries create a successful track record on implementation, they should consider a more robust CBM agenda consisting of: 1) more aggressive measures to eliminate the NLL as a flashpoint for North-South conflict; 2) greater transparency and information sharing on military plans, programs, and operations; and 3) constraints on military movements and activities to reduce the risk of a North Korean surprise attack.

The two Koreas, beginning this past April in their Panmunjom Declaration, have taken ownership of their own security dialogue and, with the announcement yesterday on tension reduction measures, are now fully vested in this process. The Trump administration should be doing everything it possibly can to empower both countries to achieve success.

RICHARD SOKOLSKY

• 38 North. SEPTEMBER 19, 2018:
<https://www.38north.org/2018/09/rsokolsky091918/>

Two Koreas reach key agreement to reduce military tensions

SEOUL/PYONGYANG, Sept. 19 (Joint Press Corps-Yonhap) — The two Koreas agreed Wednesday to set maritime, air and ground buffer zones in front-line areas as part of efforts to reduce military tensions, prevent accidental clashes and build trust.

They also agreed to halt military drills near the military demarcation line (MDL), withdraw some border guard posts, disarm the Joint Security Area in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and jointly excavate war remains in the buffer zone.

These measures are included in the agreement that Defense Minister Song Young-moo and his North Korean counterpart, No Kwang-chol, signed after the Pyongyang summit between President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The agreement is part of efforts to flesh out the military part of the April inter-Korean summit accord that calls for halting “all hostile acts” against each other and “practically eliminate the danger of war.”

A joint military committee will be operated to check the enforcement of the agreement.

“(The two sides) have decided to completely halt all hostile acts in all spaces, land, sea and air, and agreed on concrete measures to implement the decision,” Seoul’s defense ministry said in a press release.

Under the agreement, the two Koreas will set up a 10-kilometer-wide buffer zone with the MDL as the standard line. Within the zone, artillery drills and regiment-level field maneuvers will be suspended. The two sides have exchanged fire along the border 96 times since the armistice was signed, halting the Korean War in 1953.

They will also set a maritime buffer zone spanning around 80 km in the East and West Seas to prevent unintended naval clashes. In the zone, artillery firing and naval drills will be suspended, while routine patrol operations near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), a de facto maritime border, and efforts to protect fishing activities will continue.

The bilateral agreement also reaffirmed the April decision to designate a “maritime peace zone” near the NLL in the West Sea and set a joint fishing area. The two sides will work out details at their joint military committee, but tough negotiations are expected given their differences on the sea line.

Pyongyang has long disputed the NLL on the grounds that it was unilaterally drawn by the U.S.-led U.N. Command after the Korean War.

To prevent accidental aircraft clashes, the two sides will set a 40 km-wide no-fly zone along the western part of the MDL and a 80 km-wide one along the eastern side. But they set exceptions for emergencies, such as when aircraft need to be used to extinguish wildfires or transport patients.

To transform the DMZ into a “peace zone,” they will each pull out 11 guard posts on a trial basis by the end of this year and halt drills targeting each other near the MDL starting Nov. 1.

They will start a monthlong process to disarm the JSA following a 20-day landmine removal operation set to begin Oct. 1.

The joint project to retrieve war remains in the DMZ is set to take place in Cheorwon, Gangwon Province, from April 1, 2019, to Oct. 31 following the removal of landmines and other explosives

later this year.

The two Koreas, in addition, agreed to devise military measures to jointly use the Han River estuary where civilian access has been restricted due to inter-Korean tensions.

While announcing the outcome of his summit with Kim, Moon said that the two Koreas had agreed to remove “all threats across the peninsula” that could trigger war.

Yonhap News

• Yonhap News, 2018/09/19 16:00:

<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2018/09/19/0200000000AEN20180919004257315.html>

Moon Jae-in is gambling with North Korea - and it could upset the US

Many South Koreans want an improved North-South relationship. But if Moon improves that relationship without denuclearization progress, it could cause a rift with Washington.

Imagine you are the president of South Korea. Your country relies on its alliance with the United States as a deterrent against a nuclear-armed North Korea. Donald Trump criticizes your country over trade, spent the better part of a year threatening military strikes against North Korea, and reportedly even drafted a tweet ordering the withdrawal of the family members of US military stationed in South Korea, which would have been interpreted as a prelude to war.

What would you do? You'd rush to ease tensions with North Korea as fast as you could, while trying to mediate between the US and North Korea. And that's exactly what the world witnessed this week in the third summit this year between the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, and North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. Mission accomplished – for the moment.

In Pyongyang this week Moon and Kim announced a variety of inter-Korean agreements ranging from easing military tensions to more family reunions, and Kim agreed to become the first North Korean leader to visit South Korea. Taken together, these steps could reduce the chances for a conflict and will keep the diplomacy moving.

Any progress in addressing North Korea's nuclear program, however, was much less certain: “The North expressed its willingness to continue to take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, as the United States takes corresponding measures in accordance with the spirit of the 12 June US-DPRK Joint Statement.” Exactly what “corresponding measures” the US would have to take, of course, is unclear.

While the US is concerned about North Korea's nuclear program, South Korea has to live next door, and many there want an improved North-South relationship regardless of progress on the nuclear issue. And so, Moon is gambling. If he improves the relationship with Pyongyang without tangible progress on the nuclear issue, that could cause a serious rift with Washington. China would support the South's engagement with the North, further driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul. Japan's anxiety over the threat from North Korea would increase, and its opposition to diplomacy could push Seoul and Tokyo – two American allies – further apart.

A strong alliance with the US and progress on denuclearization are necessary to maintain popular support for diplomacy in South Korea

Moon recognizes that detente with North Korea will only go so far without progress on denuclearization, as past rounds of North-South diplomacy have shown. A strong alliance with the US and progress on denuclearization are necessary to maintain popular support for diplomacy in South Korea and the leverage necessary to extract concessions from Kim.

While far from perfect, the US should back Moon's diplomatic efforts. Standing shoulder to shoulder with Moon will reduce the opportunities for North Korea and China to drive a bigger wedge in the US-South Korea alliance and keep the chances for a diplomatic breakthrough alive. And no approach to North Korea – whether tradeoffs in diplomacy or maintaining deterrence – will be successful without a united Seoul and Washington.

The US should ride the wave of North-South diplomacy by supporting a non-binding declaration to end the Korean war – which both Koreas are pushing, and which Trump reportedly promised Kim in Singapore – in exchange for the verifiable closing of nuclear facilities that Kim put on the table with Moon. This would be a significant step forward on which both sides could build.

While Kim's intentions remain unclear, a key question is whether or not the US is capable of advancing diplomacy. While Trump has thrown the US head-first into diplomacy with North Korea – and may be the only top US official who supports the process – he is also uniquely incapable of taking advantage of complicated diplomatic negotiations, and seems only interested in the appearance of success.

Trump continues to fall for Kim's fawning praise by regularly responding to one of the world's most repressive dictators with comments like: "Thank you to Chairman Kim. We will both prove everyone wrong! There is nothing like good dialogue from two people that like each other!" Trump playing the role of North Korea desk officer undercuts his own diplomats: his impulsive comments make North Korea believe that Trump has already agreed to moves that are still being negotiated while sending the signal that only Trump's words matter. The result? North Korea publicly singles out US officials as obstacles to Trump's own wishes.

Trump is also unable to pursue a consistent strategy. After a year of threatening war, he announced a summit with Kim, then canceled the summit in a pique of anger at North Korean rhetoric only to reinstitute it days later after Moon patched things up. Trump then again abruptly canceled the secretary of state Mike Pompeo's trip to Pyongyang mere hours after it was announced in September. Further complicating things are Trump's hardline advisers including the vice-president, Mike Pence, and the national security adviser, John Bolton, who continue to look for ways to scuttle talks.

In diplomacy with North Korea there are always plenty of risks. The South Korean government may very well be unrealistic about what diplomacy can achieve (the agreement to seek a joint bid for the 2032 Summer Olympics seems Pollyannaish at best). North Korea's asking price for progress may be too high. And the US administration may not be equipped to succeed in this round of diplomacy. But these diplomatic opportunities are rare, and without a strong US-South Korea alliance there will be no way to address the threats that North Korea poses.

The United States must give peace a chance, and that means giving Moon a chance.

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