

# Singapore Summit: Trump faces North Korea dilemma after Bolton infuriates Pyongyang

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**Trump is keen to keep his appointment in Singapore but the row involving his national security adviser presents a serious hurdle.**

## Contents

- [Trump: 'We'll see' if North](#)
- [Trump approaches geopolitics](#)

North Korea's denunciation of John Bolton has forced Donald Trump to decide whether to stick with his national security adviser and his hardline tactics, or push ahead with a summit with Kim Jong-un that will provide historic spectacle but an uncertain outcome.

Underlying the plans for the Singapore summit was a fundamental ambiguity over what "complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula" means. For Pyongyang it is a fluid term that means a long-term process of disarmament, involving all major powers, in whose ranks North Korea would henceforward be counted a member.

The Trump administration thought it meant – or wanted it to mean – that Kim was ready to give up the arsenal he had declared complete and operational in January. For his part, the secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, who was tasked by Trump to set up the Kim summit, was ready to live with the ambiguity, at least until 12 June, when the unprecedented encounter is due to take place.

In weekend television appearances, Pompeo seemed to blur the US negotiating position, suggesting the aim was to prevent North Korea threatening the US mainland with nuclear weapons, a lower bar that would theoretically permit Pyongyang to retain some warheads as long as they did not build intercontinental missiles.

Ambiguity is not Bolton's style, however. In his own, competing, TV appearances, he was adamant that North Korea would have to take all its weapons apart and ship the fissile material to the US. It was this, coupled his earlier reference to the "Libya model" – which for Pyongyang summons up the memory of Muammar Gaddafi's brutalised body being paraded on a truck – that got the regime's attention.

"It was quite deliberate. We all know how Gaddafi died," said Jeffrey Lewis, the director of the East Asia nonproliferation programme at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies of Monterey. "You don't bring up a man's grisly murder as an inducement."

Vipin Narang, an associate professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said it was likely to be the bragging that Kim had been forced to the table by Trump's successful use of "maximum pressure" with sanctions and threats that had stung the Pyongyang regime most.

Kim has portrayed his diplomatic opening as a natural consequence of completing the decades-long

project to build a nuclear arsenal.

“The North Koreans were prepared to ignore a lot of what the administration said before the summit, but it was the victory lap before the race that has really set them off,” Narang said.

Bolton has a track record with the North Koreans, who blame him for persuading the George W Bush administration to quit a 1994 nuclear deal, the Agreed Framework. In his memoir, *Surrender is Not an Option*, Bolton boasts about his success in torpedoing state department efforts to keep talks with Pyongyang alive, deriding the diplomats as appeasers.

At the time, the regime denounced him as “human scum” and a “bloodsucker”, banning him from any bilateral talks. On Wednesday, the first deputy prime minister, Kim Kye-gwan, made it clear that the regime’s antipathy had not mellowed with time, noting “we do not hide our feeling of repugnance towards him”.

Earlier in the week, a western diplomat had predicted that the inevitable compromise at a Kim summit could force a parting of the ways between Trump and his third national security adviser. Trump, who has basked in suggestions he might be eligible for the Nobel peace prize, is clearly keen to keep his appointment in Singapore. The weekend row could now bring his looming dilemma forward.

The White House on Wednesday was hedging its bets, with its spokeswoman pointedly distancing Trump from Bolton’s “Libyan model”.

“Sarah Sanders threw Bolton under a bus this morning,” Lewis said.

**Julian Borger** in Washington

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## **Trump: ‘We’ll see’ if North Korea summit is on after Kim’s threat to cancel**

**Pyongyang threatened to withdraw over ‘one-sided demands’ but Trump says he hasn’t been told talks have been axed.**

Donald Trump is still ready to meet the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, at a summit next month, despite a statement from Pyongyang that it was not interested in discussing “one-sided” demands that it give up its nuclear weapons, the White House said on Wednesday.

Asked whether the summit, planned for 12 June in Singapore, was still on, Trump told reporters: “We’ll see what happens.”

He added that “we haven’t been notified at all” that the North Koreans had cancelled the meeting.

The president said he would insist on “denuclearisation” at a summit with Kim. However, the word is ambiguous. North Korea uses it to describe a long-term process in which all nuclear weapons powers would eventually disarm, while Trump administration officials have interpreted it as the

dismantling and eradication of the North Korean nuclear weapons and long-range missile programmes.

That ambiguity, which allowed plans to go forward for the first ever summit between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, appeared to have been punctured over the weekend when John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser, and Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state, went on the Sunday talkshows to give their quite different versions of the US negotiating position.

Bolton and Pompeo claimed that Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" had forced Kim to the negotiating table.

*If they want to meet, we'll be ready and if they don't, that's OK too*  
Sarah Sanders

Bolton, however, went further than Pompeo in defining denuclearisation. He said it meant "getting rid of all the nuclear weapons, dismantling them, taking them to Oakridge, Tennessee. It means getting rid of the uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing capabilities."

His comments followed an earlier remark that the administration, in disarming North Korea, would adopt the Libya model, referring to Muammar Gaddafi's surrender of his embryonic nuclear weapons programme in 2003. North Korean officials have repeatedly pointed to Gaddafi's grisly death in a Nato-backed insurgency eight years later as a reason not to give up the country's nuclear weapons.

Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's first deputy minister of foreign affairs, rejected that position on Wednesday, singling out Bolton and his comments.

Kim said: "This is not an expression of intention to address the issue through dialogue. It is essentially a manifestation of awfully sinister move to impose on our dignified state the destiny of Libya or Iraq which had been collapsed due to yielding the whole of their countries to big powers."

He concluded his statement by saying: "If the US is trying to drive us into a corner to force our unilateral nuclear abandonment, we will no longer be interested in such dialogue and cannot but reconsider our proceeding to the DPRK-US summit."

Responding to the North Korean statement, Bolton told Fox News Radio Wednesday that "we are trying to be both optimistic and realistic at the same time".

He said that the personal attack on him raised the question of "whether this really is a sign that that they're not taking our objective of denuclearization seriously."

The White House spokeswoman, Sarah Sanders, claimed the Trump administration had "fully expected" North Korea's posturing, and left the door open to the summit going ahead.

"If they want to meet, we'll be ready and if they don't, that's OK too," Sanders said.

She distanced Trump from Bolton's comments on the "Libya model". She said she had not "seen that as part of any discussions so I'm not aware that that's a model that we're using".

She added: "I haven't seen that that's a specific thing. I know that that comment was made. There's not a cookie-cutter model on how this would work. This is the President Trump model. He's going to run this the way he sees fit. We're 100% confident, as we've said many times before, as I'm sure you're all aware, he's the best negotiator and we're very confident on that front."

North Korea had earlier called the Singapore summit into question over joint exercises by US and South Korean forces which Pyongyang said involved B-52 and F-22 warplanes, both capable of carrying nuclear bombs. It argued it represented a hostile gesture that violated an April agreement between the leaders of North and South Korea.

The Pentagon said on Wednesday that there were never plans to include B-52 bombers in the Max Thunder war games. F-22 fighters have already taken part.

**Julian Borger** in Washington

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## **Trump approaches geopolitics like The Apprentice - but this is not his show**

**The US president thinks he will call the shots at his meeting with Kim Jong-un in Singapore, but might find Kim is the one in control.**

The big lesson of Trump's big week in geopolitics – in which he ditched the Iran nuclear deal while pivoting optimistically toward his summit with Kim Jong-un – is clear enough: if you want to take on the US, it really helps to have some nuclear bombs.

The praise Trump showered on the “excellent” Kim, who has conducted six nuclear tests, contrasted with the vitriol he poured on Iran which by all accounts (including those of US administration officials) had been sticking to the deal it struck with major powers in 2015 to keep its nuclear activities peaceful and small-scale.

Trump deliberately violated that deal on Tuesday in the most comprehensive manner possible, restoring all US sanctions on Iran and threatening European and other foreign companies with crippling punitive measures if they continue to do business in Iran.

Literally in the next breath, the president looked forward to meeting the North Korean leader at a summit that we now know will take place in Singapore on 12 June. Kim has gone from being Little Rocket Man and “a madman” to an “honourable” and “excellent” guy in a matter of months.

It was like the finale of *The Apprentice*, Trump's former reality show, where only the Donald had the power to decide who would be a winner and who would end up a loser, and then to laud them or denigrate them accordingly.

The backdrop has changed from a TV studio to the Oval Office but the formula remains the same: confected distractions about who's up and who's down, with Trump at centre stage at all times and at all costs.

It is hard to imagine anyone else openly revelling in his nighttime television ratings while welcoming home traumatised American prisoners freed by the Pyongyang regime as a summit sweetener.

But the difference between reality show and the real world is that in the latter he alone cannot control the outcomes. Trump may think Kim is making a guest appearance on his show, but in

Singapore he may find himself with a walk-on part on Kim's programme. That could be a jolting discovery.

Trump's courtiers appear to have allowed his expectations for the summit to float ever upwards in a well-sealed bubble. His secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, has defined the US goal at the summit as "permanent verifiable, irreversible dismantling of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction", something that had to happen "without delay". A bad deal is "not an option".

According to the *Japan Times*, the US demands also include the North Korean surrender of documents on weapons design and even the exile of the country's own nuclear weapons engineers, so that the regime is divested of its atomic knowhow.

The likelihood of this happening is vanishingly small. Everything that Kim Jong-un has said or done reinforces the impression he sees the creation of a nuclear arsenal, a project he declared complete at the beginning of the year, as the cornerstone of his dynasty's survival. When Pompeo went to Pyongyang to fetch the US prisoners and finalise arrangements for the summit, Kim Yong-chol, the vice-chairman of the Workers' party central committee, told him "we have perfected our nuclear capability" while insisting that the achievement was "not the result of sanctions that have been imposed from outside".

"I hope the United States also will be happy with our success," Kim said, adding: "I have high expectations the US will play a very big role in establishing peace on the Korean peninsula."

Everything about that choice of words reinforces the near-consensus among North Korea watchers that Pyongyang's aim at the summit is to gain US acknowledgement that it is a nuclear weapons power, and to be treated as such.

The regime did not have much incentive to surrender its arsenal, even before this week. When that option was raised at informal back-channel talks in Europe last year, North Korean representatives pointed to Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi as examples of what happens to Washington's enemies who dismantle their WMD programmes.

The treatment of Iran, after painstakingly negotiating a deal with the major powers and abiding by it, can only entrench Kim's resolve to hold on tight to his insurance policy. No state armed with nuclear weapons has ever been invaded. And the presence at Trump's side of John Bolton, an implacable advocate of regime change in both Iran and North Korea, is akin to the US president arriving in Singapore in a T-shirt saying: You Have No Reason to Trust Me.

For his part, Kim will walk into the negotiating chamber with considerable leverage. After Iran, Trump desperately needs a win. He has raised the prospect of world peace, no less. With the world's television cameras pointing at him, on the greatest stage on earth, he will be loth to announce failure.

And going back to "maximum pressure" if the talks fail is not really an option. This administration has spent all the credit in the diplomatic bank and is deep into the red. Few countries will strain themselves now to strengthen or enforce sanctions on Washington's adversaries, if Trump walks away from two nuclear negotiations in a row.

If, on the other hand, Kim offers Trump something that can be sold as a win, the president will be tempted to grab it. And when that turns out to be much less than complete verifiable irreversible disarmament, Trump the showman will face a real dilemma: give up on the illusions that he could persuade North Korea to disarm and make a better deal than the Iran agreement; or fall back on missile threats and risk going to war.

**Julian Borger** in Washington

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