



North Korea Had Spurned Talks With U.S. Due to Trump's Latest Sanctions

Despite months of secret contacts, North Korea has been playing hard to get back to the negotiating table – even as Rex Tillerson reaches out again.

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In the weeks before U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's call Tuesday for talks with Pyongyang, North Korean officials were privately telling their international counterparts that they see little point in discussions with the United States and other key powers, several current and former U.S. and U.N.-based officials told [Foreign Policy](#).

North Koreans complained that Washington reneged on a pledge made earlier this fall to restart talks with Pyongyang if it halted all nuclear and missile tests for sixty days, according to those sources. Instead of talks, North Korea says, it got slapped with a fresh round of U.S. sanctions.

The development has dealt a blow to diplomatic efforts by the State Department and the United Nations to restart great-power talks with North Korea, which withdrew from those discussions in April 2009 to protest U.N. sanctions.

Pyongyang's skepticism about the value of negotiations comes just as Tillerson made the administration's most direct overture for talks yet, [saying](#) he was open to sitting down with his North Korean counterparts for a first meeting "without preconditions" — though only after they showed their seriousness by imposing a pause on nuclear and ballistic tests.

But it's not clear that Tillerson has the full backing of President Donald Trump, who publicly kneecapped previous diplomatic efforts by his secretary of state.

The White House on Wednesday appeared to pour cold water on the idea of an immediate new round of talks. A National Security Council spokesperson said that the North would first have to change its behavior, including but not limited to halting nuclear and missile tests.

"Given North Korea's most recent missile test, clearly now is not the time," the NSC spokesperson told [FP](#).

North Korea, meanwhile, appears to be waiting to see how serious the United States really is.

"The North Koreans have put the whole issue of contacts with the Americans on hold," said Joel Wit, a senior fellow at the U.S.-Korea Institute at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, who said the North Koreans are likely confused by the contradictory messages emerging from Washington.

“The Trump administration is sending mixed signals, and it is only undermining Secretary Tillerson’s effort to start some sort of dialogue,” Wit said. The administration, he added, “needs to get on the same song sheet, and the White House needs to be backing Tillerson in everything he says.”

The United States and North Korea have been engaged in a mostly secret diplomatic dance for much of the year, according to several published [reports](#). But even before the latest round of U.S. sanctions in November, Pyongyang seemed to have gotten cold feet about the idea of returning to the negotiating table.

In a closed-door briefing to the U.N. Security Council Tuesday night, U.N. Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman, who just concluded a visit to Pyongyang, said the North Korean government told him that the time is not right for such talks, according to a Security Council diplomat — though Pyongyang is open to continuing discussions with the United Nations. North Korea has sent similar messages to the United States through a number of intermediaries, including the Russians and Chinese envoy Song Tao, who visited Pyongyang in November in what one well-placed diplomat characterized as a “failed” effort to start talks.

The State Department reached out to the North Koreans as early as May, when the State Department’s special representative for North Korea policy, Joseph Yun, traveled to Oslo, Norway, for secret talks with a senior North Korean official, Choe Hon Sui, the director-general of her foreign ministry’s North America bureau, to discuss Washington’s concerns about American detainees.

The following month, one of those detainees, an American university student named Otto Warmbier, was released on the brink of death. He died shortly after.

The talks covered more ground than just prisoners, providing an opening for broader nuclear talks, according to current and former U.S. officials. Tillerson encouraged Yun to maintain his contacts with Choe as well as with diplomats at the North Korean mission to the United Nations to explore the possibility of reopening stalled talks.

For her part, Choe signaled that North Korea had its own red line. Speaking to a group of former U.S. officials in separate meeting in Oslo, Choe said that her government would not enter into talks with the United States if Washington sought to make North Korea give up its nuclear weapons, according to a source familiar with those talks.

As part of his outreach, Yun signaled to the North Koreans that Pyongyang could create an atmosphere for direct talks if they enforced a voluntary moratorium on nuclear and ballistic missile tests for 60 days, according to current and former U.S. officials. The *Washington Post* previously [reported](#) on Yun’s proposal.

Trump followed up on Nov. 21 by relisting North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism and imposed a new round of sanctions. Before the month was over, North Korea launched its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile ever, a monster Hwasong-15 missile capable of traversing the American mainland.

But North Korea's interest in talks had already cooled after President Trump delivered a highly provocative address in September to the U.N. General Assembly, where he threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea.

The following month, North Korea's negotiator, Choe, attended a Moscow conference on nonproliferation along experts and former U.S. officials, including Wendy Sherman, the former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs. This time, she declined to hold any discussions with any of the Americans.

Instead, she met with Russian officials, and informed them that her government was not prepared to restart nuclear talks with the United States.

"Choe rejected talks when she went to Moscow in October," said one diplomat briefed on the back-channel talks. "Kim Jong Un clearly said 'no' through all the diplomatic channels."

Still, Trump had not fully closed the door to diplomacy.

In October, the president gave his blessing to an initiative by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres to try a diplomatic approach, several sources said.

During an Oct. 20 White House [meeting](#), the U.N. chief broached the idea of sending a personal envoy to Pyongyang, envisioning it as a way to calm the war of words between Trump and Kim. That meeting came about one month after North Korea's foreign minister, Ri Yong Ho invited Guterres during the U.N. General Assembly summit to send a personal envoy to Pyongyang to begin discussions on a range of issues.

Trump expressed skepticism that a fresh U.N. initiative could persuade North Korea's leader to contain his increasingly provocative nuclear activities, but gave enough encouragement for Guterres to dispatch Feltman on a three-day trip to Pyongyang in December.

When he got back, Feltman said there could "only be a diplomatic solution" in North Korea, and underscored the urgency of opening diplomatic channels to "prevent miscalculations" that could lead to war.

Though Feltman told the U.N. Security Council late Tuesday that North Korea wasn't ready for talks, all the progress that Pyongyang has made on its weapons program — and continued U.S. and U.N. sanctions — might be changing that calculus.

Since it appears to have overcome many of its technical hurdles, North Korea may be ready to come to the table, said Robert Einhorn, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's arms control and nonproliferation initiative.

"I think the North Koreans will wait a few days to see if this is a genuine signal from the Trump administration. They will want to see what the president has to say or tweet about it," he said.

“But they are undoubtedly getting more pressure from the Chinese, and the Trump administration has done a pretty good job of tightening the screws. They may be beginning to feel the pressure pinch.”

But there are differing views inside the administration as to the prospects of diplomacy, and some officials who are skeptical of talks are more inclined to potential military action against North Korea, former officials and congressional aides said.

For the moment, the White House believes the sanctions are working and it doesn't need a full-court diplomatic press.

“I think they're satisfied with the trajectory of the pressure campaign,” said Ely Ratner of the Council on Foreign Relations. “So they're not going to take their foot off the gas right now,” said Ratner, who was former Vice President Joe Biden's deputy national security advisor.

The question is whether there's enough time left to pressure Pyongyang after the latest milestones in long-range missile development.

“It's unclear there's enough runway left for the administration to do that, given how quickly the North Koreans are moving,” he said. “And it's unclear if there's a negotiating partner on the other side.”

FP staff writer Robbie Gramer contributed to this report.