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Trump emphasises hostile stance on North Korea

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US President Trump has flatly denied remarks he made in an interview last Thursday in the *Wall Street Journal* that he had “a good relationship” with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The president’s broadside against the newspaper has dampened speculation that the United States could be preparing to negotiate with Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile programs.

Trump and White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders both lashed out at the *Wall Street Journal*, branding its article as “fake news.” Trump claimed in his bellicose tweets that he had said, “I’d probably have a good relationship...” not “I probably have...” and Sanders released an audio file claiming to prove the point. The newspaper stood by its story and released its own audio of the interview.

The latest fracas underscores the erratic character of the Trump

administration's stance toward North Korea that veers wildly from reckless military threats to suggestions that a negotiated solution is possible. Regardless of Trump's actual words, the White House left the impression in the media for days that talks with the North Korean leader could be imminent.

Asked in the interview whether he had spoken to Kim, Trump refused to confirm or deny that a conversation had taken place. "I don't want to comment on it," he declared. "I'm not saying I have or I haven't." In his tirade against the *Wall Street Journal*, he did not retract those remarks.

The interview took place following talks last week between North and South Korea for the first time in more than two years, at which Pyongyang agreed to send a team to the Winter Olympics, due to take place in South Korea next month. Further discussions between the two Koreas are scheduled today to work out the details of North Korea's involvement in the Olympics.

However, the scope of the talks remains circumscribed. South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared last week there would be no easing of the sanctions on North Korea as a result of its participation in the Olympics. For its part, North Korea bluntly rejected South Korea's attempt to raise the issue of denuclearisation during the meeting and has repeatedly declared that it will not give up its nuclear arsenal.

While the Trump administration suggested last week that the US could join talks under the right circumstances, it has insisted that North Korea agree to denuclearise and take steps in that

direction before any discussion. Moreover, Trump's ultimatum last week to the European powers to join the US in rewriting the nuclear deal struck in 2015 with Iran only serves to confirm to North Korea that it can have no confidence in any agreement struck with Washington.

The United States is proceeding to further tighten crippling sanctions on North Korea, in what the White House has described as a campaign of "maximum pressure." The US and Canada are jointly sponsoring a meeting of foreign ministers of around 20 nations in Vancouver on Tuesday to further tighten the economic and diplomatic noose around North Korea.

US State Department policy director Brian Hook told reporters in Washington on Thursday that the US wanted an increased focus on blocking ships from supplying oil and other goods to North Korea. "Maritime interdiction helps us to disrupt resources and the financial side helps us to disrupt the financing of its nuclear and ballistic-missile program," he said.

South Korea has already seized two ships that entered one of its ports, alleging they were involved in transferring goods on the high seas to North Korean vessels—which is banned under UN sanctions. The latest UN resolution on North Korea passed in December allowed the impounding of ships in port, but did not include their seizure on the high seas.

According to the *Globe and Mail*, the United States and Canada will push for tough measures, including "naval interdiction." The article suggested that a naval presence could be established off North Korea to impose what would amount to a blockade of the

small, impoverished country. Such measures would be an act of war.

Both China and Russia have refused to participate in the Vancouver meeting, which consists primarily of those countries that joined the US-led war against North Korea from 1950 to 1953. “Holding this kind of meeting that doesn’t include important parties to the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue cannot help in advancing an appropriate resolution to the issue,” Lu Kang, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said.

China has previously agreed to US demands for ever-tougher UN sanctions on North Korea in a bid to avert a disastrous war on the Korean Peninsula. The White House even issued a statement last Friday welcoming China’s sharply reduced trade with Pyongyang. However, Trump is pressing for a full economic blockade of North Korea—something that Beijing has resisted, fearing an economic and political collapse that Washington could exploit to install a sympathetic regime in Pyongyang.

The danger of war remains and tensions could rapidly escalate after the Olympics. The Pentagon has already indicated that massive joint military exercises with South Korea, currently delayed, will proceed in March. Pyongyang has always condemned such drills, which are thinly disguised rehearsals for war with North Korea, and staged its own demonstrations of military power. 38North, a US website that monitors North Korea closely, has reported signs that Pyongyang may be preparing for another nuclear test.

While talking about the possibility of talks, the Trump

administration has affirmed again and again, in the most bellicose language, its determination to prevent, by military means if necessary, North Korea acquiring a nuclear arsenal.

One of South Korea's top former generals, Chun In-bum, last week warned that war against North Korea was "not going to be like going into Iraq or Afghanistan" but would be a protracted war. "North Korea is very militarised, far [beyond] any imagination," he said, pointing out that it had a fighting force of a million, and chemical and biological, as well as nuclear, weapons.

The risk of war erupting over a mistake or miscalculation was highlighted on Saturday when a false alarm about an incoming missile created panic in Hawaii. The danger is that what reportedly resulted from one person pushing a wrong button could, in an already extremely tense standoff, trigger a response by the US military and the eruption of conflict.

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