



## Rift Grows Between U.S. Allies Over North Korea's Nuclear Threat

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One longstanding U.S. ally still thinks North Korea poses an urgent nuclear threat. Another is steadily increasing economic ties with the regime. And Kim Jong Un is doing his best to exploit the divide.

Less than three months after shaking Kim's hand in Singapore, U.S. President Donald Trump is confronting an increasingly fractured diplomatic landscape as his two key allies -- Japan and South Korea -- pursue differing ends of his two-pronged North Korea strategy. In Tokyo, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government reaffirmed Tuesday that North Korea posed a "grave and imminent" threat to Japan, despite Kim's pledge on "denuclearization."

Meanwhile, in Seoul, President Moon Jae-in is taking steps to upgrade ties with Kim, establishing a liaison office over the border that, according to U.S. officials, could violate sanctions. Moon plans to visit Pyongyang next month -- the first such trip by a South Korean president in 11 years -- and his defense ministry is reportedly considering striking a reference to North Korea's military as "our enemy."

"The establishment of the liaison office so that South Korea and North Korea can communicate on a more regular basis is an effective way of creating a wedge between the United States and South Korea," said Stephen Nagy, a senior associate professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo. "If there is a fracture or weakening of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, this will potentially put Japan in a vulnerable situation."

### Shifting Approach

The fissures reflect Trump's own shifting approach toward North Korea, which threatened with "fire and fury" last year. Shortly after his meeting with Kim in June, Trump declared on Twitter: "There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea."

More recently, he requested, scheduled -- and then postponed -- a Pyongyang trip this month by U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. Trump said the move was necessary because nuclear talks were "not making sufficient progress," his first public doubts about efforts to court Kim personally while pressuring the regime diplomatically.

North Korea has tested U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea that have already been strained by Trump's complaints about perceived trade and military imbalances. Recent

statements from Kim's regime have blamed Japan for "harassing peace," questioned South Korea's commitment to ties and accused the U.S. of conducting covert military rehearsals for the invasion of Pyongyang.

### Warning Letter

Pompeo's trip was called off after the U.S. received a letter from senior North Korean officials warning that talks were "again at stake and may fall apart," CNN reported Tuesday, citing people familiar with the process. The letter blamed the U.S.'s reluctance to advance discussions about a peace treaty, CNN said.

Moon's plan to establish a liaison office at the Gaeseong industrial park north of the militarized border has emerged as another friction point, with an unidentified American official telling South Korea's Chosun newspaper last week that the facility could violate United Nations and U.S. sanctions. A State Department spokesperson told Bloomberg that ties between the Koreas must move "in lockstep" with progress on eliminating Kim's nuclear arsenal.

"As I feared, #KJU has found a split between the U.S. & #SouthKorea he will now fully exploit to weaken sanctions & the U.S. position," Senator Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, said Monday on Twitter. "It appears the govt of South Korea is moving forward with opening an Inter-Korean Liaison Office with #NorthKorea over the objections of the U.S."

The dispute poses a challenge for Moon, a long-time "sunshine policy" advocate elected last year on a promise to promote peace. The liaison office was among the few specific gestures he committed to during his own historic with Kim in April, and a delay could prompt North Korea to rescind his invitation to Pyongyang.

Pompeo's trip was supposed to lay the groundwork for the liaison office, and the two Koreas must discuss what to do, Moon spokesman Kim Eui-keum told reporters on Monday.

"We can't say there isn't an impact," Kim Eui-keum said, adding that the South Korean government doesn't believe the office would violate any sanctions. "We are in close cooperation with the U.S. for the liaison office opening."

Pompeo spoke Friday with his counterparts -- Taro Kono of Japan and Kang Kyung-wha of South Korea -- to discuss nuclear talks with North Korea, according to statements released Monday by the State Department. The three diplomats agreed that diplomatic pressure must continue until North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons.

Japan said in its annual defense white paper Tuesday that monitoring was necessary to ensure North Korea takes concrete action toward giving up its bombs and missiles. Abe has used the threat to justify more defense spending, with the Yomiuri newspaper reporting last week that the defense ministry was seeking its seventh-straight budget increase.

While Trump has held out the prospect of another meeting with the North Korea leader, saying in a tweet that he looked forward to "seeing him soon," the dispute has put pressure on Moon, who again finds himself struggling to hold together a shaky peace process. His summit with Kim Jong Un next month will go ahead as planned, a spokesman said.

“From day one, these have been communications problems in the alliance,” said Eric Gomez, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington. “The North definitely is exploiting a gap that already exists.”