



President Trump lowers expectations

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WASHINGTON — President Trump’s admission that his much-anticipated June 12 bilateral meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un may not happen is evidence of a new messaging strategy by his administration after miscalculating what Pyongyang was willing to give — and claiming victory before it was won.

“I think that the president has belatedly figured out that claiming the possibility that talks will occur as a victory in and of itself — and having supporters chant about the Nobel Prize to him — was premature in the extreme,” said Chris Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “It was way too soon for him to be encouraging that kind of response. Now you see the Trump administration trying to manage expectations.”

Trump said that while the U.S. is still preparing to sit down with Kim — and even offer him protection in exchange for ramping down the North Korean nuclear program — he acknowledged that things could change.

“We’ll see what happens. There are certain conditions that we want, and I think we’ll get those conditions,” Trump told reporters at the White House ahead of a meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in. “And if we don’t, we don’t have the meeting.”

“The meeting is scheduled, as you know, on June 12 in Singapore,” Trump said. “And whether or not it happens, you’ll be knowing pretty soon. But we’re talking right now.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed more confidence that things are moving as planned.

“We’re continuing to do our work and lay the foundation for a successful meeting,” Pompeo told reporters. “We’re still working towards June 12.”

The change in tone came after North Korean officials blasted national security adviser John Bolton for suggesting that North Korea would quickly eliminate its weapons of mass destruction as Libya did — a move North Korean leaders see as a dangerous approach that could end with Kim facing the same deadly fate as former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Pyongyang has expressed a willingness of a phased wind-down, but never promised a fast shutdown, experts said.

“It seems President Trump was confused about North Korea’s position for some reason, and it’s unclear why because North Korea has been very clear about their position,” said Frank Aum, senior expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace and former Defense Department adviser on North Korea.

“When Bolton gave an interview and talked about following a Libya model, Pyongyang said, ‘I don’t think so, that ain’t happening. You haven’t been listening to us,’ ” said Paul Carroll, senior adviser at nuclear risk-reduction group N Square.

But the setback doesn’t necessarily mean a total loss for the administration.

Trump and administration officials “still have a couple of weeks to do their homework and realize diplomacy is a marathon and not a sprint,” Carroll said.