

The summit's back on: Trump and North Korea's Kim to meet June 12

Debra J. Saunders

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WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump announced Friday that the June 12 summit in Singapore — where he will meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for the first time — is back on.

“The meeting went very well,” Trump told reporters after an Oval Office meeting with Pyongyang’s second most powerful official, Kim Yong Chol. “We’ll be meeting on June 12th in Singapore.”

The summit, which is intended to begin the process of ending North Korea’s nuclear program, would be the first face-to-face engagement between an American president and a North Korean leader.

Trump abruptly canceled the planned summit last week, citing increasingly bellicose statements from North Korea that included calling Vice President Mike Pence a “political dummy” and threatening a “nuclear-to-nuclear showdown.”

In response Pyongyang adopted a more conciliatory note with an offer to give Washington more time to prepare. Trump then softened as, he noted, “Everybody plays games.”

The purpose of Friday’s meeting ostensibly was for Kim Yong Chol to present Trump with a letter from North Korea’s 36-year-old leader, amid talks aimed at reviving the summit. Afterward Trump told reporters the letter was “very nice,” but then acknowledged that he had “purposefully” not yet read it.

Later Friday, deputy White House press secretary Hogan Gidley confirmed that Trump had read the letter, but he did not reveal its contents.

Kim Yong Chol, the vice chairman of the North Korean ruling party’s central committee, was greeted at the White House by Chief of Staff John Kelly. After the meeting concluded, Trump

walked Kim Yong Chol to his car then strolled over to where reporters were awaiting his remarks.

Scaling back expectations

Gone was the bluster about the June 12 summit producing a swift game-changing deal to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Instead an upbeat Trump announced the whole-world-is-watching meeting will be “a get-to-know-you kind of situation.” Trump also described the summit as starting a process.

“I actually think it’s a welcome move to hear Trump talk about the summit in a more realistic way and trying to scale down expectations of what can be accomplished in such a meeting/format,” Stimson Center research analyst Jenny Town said.

“It seems the focus is still on denuclearization but in a more pragmatic, implementable process, rather than an all-or-nothing arrangement,” she said. “The all-or-nothing approach was doomed to fail for so many reasons — both political and technical.”

According to the president, the two sides on Friday discussed a possible end to the Korean war, which has not officially ended even though hostilities ceased some 65 years ago.

They did not discuss human rights.

Last year, Human Rights Watch described North Korea as “one of the most repressive authoritarian states in the world,” as Kim has generated “fearful obedience by using public executions, arbitrary detention and forced labor.”

Trump said Kim Yong Chol did mention U.S. sanctions, a reference to the “maximum pressure” actions that the administration believes prodded North Korea to the negotiating table.

‘Maximum pressure’

Asked if “maximum pressure” is over, Trump replied, “It’s going to remain what it is now. I don’t even want to use the term ‘maximum pressure’ anymore” as the two sides are getting along.

In a visit to Pyongyang Thursday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said there could be no comprehensive denuclearization deal without lifting the sanctions.

Eric Gomez of the conservative Cato Institute argued that “‘maximum pressure’ was a flawed approach because it offered no peaceful path for North Korea to take that would make the pressure stop.”

He said “Trump should not abandon sanctions and other forms of pressure against North Korea, but he should use those tools in concert with diplomacy to change North Korean behavior.”

Kim Yong Chol’s visit was the second ever by a North Korean official and his first trip to the United States. The State Department apparently had to issue a waiver to allow his entry as

President Barack Obama put him on a travel sanctions list in 2010 for his role in a cyberattack against Sony Pictures.

In 2000, President Bill Clinton met with a North Korean official who delivered a letter from Kim Jong Un's father, Kim Jong Il.

This second visit proved more suspenseful as the international community waited to see if the summit would proceed as scheduled. Town now sees a reason to tone down the drama.

“We need to move away from these sensationalized and extreme stances and think in more practical terms of how to get from A to B, along with all the potential pitfalls, consequences and benefits to choices along the way,” she said.