

ASIA PACIFIC

North and South Korea Agree to Border Talks Next Week

By CHOE SANG-HUN JAN. 5, 2018

SEOUL, South Korea — President Moon Jae-in of South Korea said on Friday that he would take a tougher line with North Korea than his progressive predecessors, vowing to strengthen the military even as the two Koreas agreed to start high-level talks next week.

“I won’t be weak-kneed or just focus on dialogue, as we did in the past,” Mr. Moon told leaders of the Korean Senior Citizens Association. “I will push for dialogue and pursue peace, but will do so based on a strong national defense capability.”

In inviting members of the association to the presidential residence, Mr. Moon was trying to lessen fears among older and conservative South Koreans that he might be conceding too much to the North as he doggedly champions talks. Such concerns have persisted even as Mr. Moon has moved to build more powerful missiles and get new weapons from the United States to counter the North’s growing nuclear threat.

Conservative South Koreans remain deeply skeptical of the so-called Sunshine Policy of two previous progressive leaders, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, who encouraged trade with the North and allowed large investment and aid shipments there in a belief that such largess would help North Korea open up and denuclearize.

That policy brought about a rare détente on the divided peninsula. But not only has the North refused to abandon its nuclear program, under its new leader, Kim Jong-un, it has also accelerated the pace of nuclear and missile tests. Some conservatives fear that Mr. Moon, also a progressive, might revive the Sunshine Policy and cause friction with Washington — a concern Mr. Moon sought to dispel.

Earlier on Friday, North and South Korea agreed to hold high-level talks next week, moving toward a possible thaw a day after Washington agreed not to hold any joint military exercises with the South during its Winter Olympics, officials said.

North Korea on Friday accepted the South's proposal that the two Koreas hold the negotiations at the border village of Panmunjom on Tuesday. There, they will discuss the North's offer to send a delegation to the Winter Olympics being held in the South Korean town of Pyeongchang starting Feb. 7.

The North's leader, Mr. Kim, made the offer during his New Year's Day speech, in which he also called for easing military tensions on the divided Korean Peninsula. That unleashed a series of interactions between the two Koreas, which raised hopes of an improvement in inter-Korean relations.

Mr. Moon, who has repeatedly called for the North's Olympic participation, quickly welcomed the North Korean gesture and proposed holding the talks in Panmunjom.

On Wednesday, North Korea restored a telephone hotline at Panmunjom that had been cut off in early 2016 amid tensions over the North's nuclear weapons program. It was through this hotline that North Korea told the South on Friday that it was agreeing to start a high-level dialogue at the border village, the only place in the Demilitarized Zone where soldiers from the North and South stand just feet from each other.

The Panmunjom talks will be the first high-level inter-Korean dialogue in more than two years, coming after months of warlike threats from both North Korea and the United States over the North's nuclear weapons program.

“The agenda for the talks will be how to improve South-North relations, including matters concerning the Pyeongchang Olympics,” said Baik Tae-hyun, a spokesman of the Unification Ministry, a South Korean government agency handling relations with North Korea.

Details like who will lead each side’s delegation to the talks will be sorted out in the coming days in an exchange of documents through Panmunjom, Mr. Baik said.

Once the official dialogue begins, the two sides must sort out such details as the size of the North’s Olympic delegation, its travel route, lodging and other logistics.

South Korea hopes that the North Korean athletes will travel across the heavily armed land border for the political symbolism of such a gesture. It also hopes that the two Koreas can march together behind a single “unified Korea” flag during the opening ceremony of the Olympics.

A potentially tricky issue for the South is how to respond should the North suggest that its Olympic delegation be led by one of the senior officials blacklisted by Washington or the United Nations Security Council on suspicion of involvement in the North’s nuclear weapons programs or human rights abuses.

The South will make sure that no sanctions violations will occur during the Olympics, Mr. Baik said on Friday.

South Korea, which champions dialogue as the best solution to resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, hopes that the Winter Olympics will provide a lull in the nuclear standoff.

On Thursday, Mr. Moon talked with President Trump by phone and asked him to make the Olympics a success by postponing joint military exercises until after the Games in February and the Paralympics in March. North Korea has always denounced such exercises as a rehearsal for an invasion of the North.

Mr. Trump agreed to Mr. Moon’s suggestion. He said his tough actions and warnings against North Korea in the past months helped force it to start dialogue with the South.

The quick series of interactions across the inter-Korean border have been spurred by the young North Korean leader's initiative in reaching out as well as Mr. Moon's eagerness for dialogue.

Up until Mr. Kim's surprise overture, North Korea has routinely disparaged the South as an American puppet and warned that it could strike the United States and its allies with nuclear missiles. In his New Year's speech, he said he now had a "nuclear button" to release intercontinental ballistic missiles at any target in the mainland United States. Mr. Trump responded in kind, boasting that his button was actually "much bigger."

Some analysts say that after a busy year of nuclear and missile tests, Mr. Kim may be trying to draw South Korea and the United States into negotiations in hopes of easing the biting sanctions in return for de-escalation of the tensions.

But North Korea insists that it will never give up its nuclear weapons, while Washington and Seoul want it to dismantle its entire nuclear arsenal.

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