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Trump's Promises to Kim Jong-un Leave U.S. and Allies Scrambling

Cooper, Helene; Landler, Mark . New York Times (Online) , New York: New York Times Company. Jun 15, 2018.

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

As the president praised the North Korean leader, the Pentagon and South Korea moved toward canceling a large-scale and long-planned military exercise that was set for August.

FULL TEXT

WASHINGTON —President Trump praised the strongman tactics of North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, and dismissed American military exercises with South Korea as a waste of money on Friday, as his administration and allies scrambled to accommodate the president's promises to Mr. Kim after their historic summit meeting this week.

The Pentagon and Seoul moved toward canceling a large-scale and long-planned military exercise that was set for August, Defense Department officials said. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo wrapped up days of talks with top officials in South Korea, Japan and China, where he sought to maintain American steadfastness in the region.

In a Friday morning interview on the White House lawn, Mr. Trump echoed what his critics have said: That his meeting in Singapore would elevate Mr. Kim's status as a credible world leader. By Mr. Trump's telling, it was part of a strategy to lower tensions with North Korea.

"I went there, I gave him credibility," Mr. Trump said. "I think it's great to give him credibility."

During the interview, with "Fox and Friends," the president also called Mr. Kim "the strong head" of North Korea. "He speaks and his people sit up at attention," Mr. Trump said. "I want my people to do the same."

Asked to clarify his comments about people sitting up, Mr. Trump later said he was kidding. But they served as a striking reminder of the president's budding admiration for Mr. Kim, a 34-year-old dictator who ordered the killing of his uncle and presides over a government that has brutalized and impoverished its people.

As Mr. Trump savors the afterglow of his meeting with Mr. Kim, he has left it to the Pentagon and the State Department to pick up the pieces on military planning and diplomacy.

Officially, planning for the Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercise, one of the world's largest, is still moving ahead. But American military officials quietly sent a much smaller delegation than originally expected to an organizational meeting this week in Seoul, after Mr. Trump's surprise announcement in Singapore that he was ending joint military exercises as an inducement for North Korea.

"It costs us a lot of money," Mr. Trump said on Friday. "I saved lot of money. That's a good thing for us."

After the summit meeting, Mr. Trump characterized the annual exercises as "very provocative"—a description that aligns with North Korea's views and sharply deviates from his own Defense Department. The Pentagon has long insisted that the exercises are not meant to provoke North Korea; rather, military officials said, they underline American commitment to its allies in the region and seek to ensure that South Korea, in particular, will be able to defend itself.

Defense Department officials said on Friday that they expected an announcement, most likely next week, that the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise will either be canceled or be scaled back sharply. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and his South Korea counterpart, Song Young-moo, discussed canceling the exercises during a telephone call on Thursday, said a Defense Department official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the announcement had not yet been made.

Officials in Seoul have also strongly indicated that the exercise will be suspended, with President Moon Jae-in agreeing to be "flexible" as long as North Korea stays engaged in dialogue and starts moving toward dismantling its nuclear weapons program. That comment was widely taken as endorsing Mr. Trump's decision to end the exercises on the same conditions.

Publicly, the Pentagon has said only that Mr. Mattis reaffirmed the "ironclad" alliance with South Korea. Pentagon officials said Mr. Mattis made similar reassurances by phone on Thursday to Japan's defense minister, Itsunori Onodera.

Mr. Pompeo was returning to Washington on Friday after nearly a week of clarifying Mr. Trump's intentions after the Singapore meeting. In Seoul on Thursday, for example, Mr. Pompeo played down the president's claim that North Korea no longer represented a nuclear threat .

"When he talked about the reduction in nuclear threat," Mr. Pompeo said, "it was with eyes wide open." He added that "it could be the case that our effort will not work, but we are determined to set the conditions."

On Friday, Mr. Trump told journalists that he would speak this weekend to diplomats about the path forward in the nuclear talks. He angrily denied that he failed to extract concessions from Mr. Kim about how swiftly North Korea would surrender its nuclear arsenal, or how the United States could verify its disarmament.

The Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise last year ran for 11 days, and involved 17,500 American forces, including about 3,000 from outside the peninsula, and 50,000 South Korean troops. The exercise includes computer simulations carried out in a large bunker south of Seoul intended to check the allies' readiness to repel aggressions by North Korea.

It is possible that the event this year would be contained to so-called tabletop exercises, which would be less visible but stop short of a cancellation. Two Defense Department officials said the large-scale performances of war-fighting skills—including naval warships and high-profile maneuvers—are all but certain to not happen this year.

However, the officials said, it is also possible that even the low-key tabletop exercises will be too much for Ulchi Freedom Guardian in August. Mr. Trump's assertion that he was canceling "war games," the officials said, makes it hard to carry out the exercise in any form without the risk of Mr. Kim accusing the United States of not keeping its

word.

The big question then becomes what happens to other exercises, after Ulchi Freedom Guardian, the officials said.

"You could probably cancel a single major exercise, like this one, without doing major damage to the alliance and its readiness," said Robert Daly, director of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States at the Wilson Center.

"But that cannot become the standard," Mr. Daly said. "You have to do joint exercises for the 32,000 American military in Korea to have strategic meaning."

If several major war games were canceled for more than a year, the impact could be significant, the officials said.

"We're generally fine to miss a single exercise, even one of this magnitude," said Kathleen Hicks, a former senior Pentagon official in the Obama administration. "Strategically, however, it will worry Japan in particular and allies in Europe who will wonder what and how much we're willing to give away."

On Capitol Hill, some leading Republicans echoed that sentiment.

"You've got to give these negotiations every opportunity to succeed," Representative Mac Thornberry, a Texas Republican who leads the House Armed Services Committee, told reporters this week.

"As long as the negotiations are being productive, these particular joint exercises that were planned for August, O.K., well, this is an opportunity to hold their feet to the fire and see if North Korea is serious about this," Mr. Thornberry said. "If they're not serious, then it's pretty easy to say those joint exercises that were scheduled for August are now going to happen in September or October."

Diplomats who have worked on North Korea said Mr. Trump's new warmth toward Mr. Kim eased months of tension between the two leaders that, in the past, would have made negotiations all but impossible. But it also reduces the leverage that American negotiators have to pressure the North to give up its nuclear weapons.

In a new propaganda film, Pyongyang seized on the meeting to showcase the warm reception that the North Korean leader received in Singapore.

"The streets were overflowing with people adoring our great leader, who is driving complex international politics with supernormal political acumen," said the 42-minute documentary, which was released by North Korea's state broadcaster.

North Korea's extravagant coverage of the meeting, said Joseph Y. Yun, a former State Department official who negotiated with North Korea, suggested that Mr. Kim might want a different relationship with the United States. But that does not mean he is willing to give up his weapons.

"I don't think our side has recognized that the price is gone up," Mr. Yun said. "We're going to have to pay more to get smaller concessions."

Credit: Helene Cooper and Mark Landler

DETAILS

Subject:	Military exercises; Presidents; Defense; Nuclear weapons; Armed forces
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