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KOREA UPDATE: Olympic Diplomacy

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KEY POINTS:

1. **Vice President Pence led the US delegation to the Winter Olympics** with the avowed intention of preventing North Korea's propaganda from hijacking the messaging of the Olympics and make clear that the maximum pressure campaign will continue.
2. In Tokyo with Japanese Prime Minister Abe, **Pence announced upcoming plans for new sanctions on North Korea**, which he vowed would be the "toughest" yet.
3. Kim Jong-un's sister, **Kim Yo-jong, made the first visit to South Korea by a member of the North's ruling Kim family**, and **extended Kim Jong-un's invitation to South Korean President Moon to visit Pyongyang in the near future**. The North Korean delegation, however, **failed to show any interest in meeting Pence**.
4. **Pence avoided contact with the North Koreans in South Korea, but conveyed US willingness to talk with the North** on his return flight home.
5. **Going forward, the gap between the Trump administration's emphasis on pressure and Moon's wish to engage will make alliance management difficult** despite the two leaders' vows to stand together.

Countering North Korea's "Charm Offensive"

Vice President Mike Pence led the US delegation to South Korea to attend the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, which began on February 9. From the get go, North Korea sought to steal the spotlight by holding a military parade in Pyongyang on the eve of the Olympics, making clear that it is not giving up its militaristic intentions. Leading up to and throughout his trip, Pence [reiterated](#) that the **US will prevent North Korea's propaganda from "hijacking" the messaging of the Olympics and make clear that the maximum pressure campaign will only intensify**. When asked about potential contact with the North's delegation, however, he did not rule out a meeting, saying "we'll see what happens."

Presenting a United Front with Japan

Pence's trip included a stop in Japan, where he met with Japanese Prime Minister Abe and reaffirmed the US-Japan alliance. Together, the two leaders committed to maintaining maximum pressure on the North Korean regime. **In Tokyo, Pence [announced US plans](#)**

to soon unveil the “toughest and most aggressive” sanctions on North Korea to halt Pyongyang’s nuclear and ballistic missile program “once and for all.” Reinforcing the US message, Abe [said](#) “meaningful dialogue” cannot be expected with North Korea “as long as they do not show genuine willingness and concrete action for... denuclearization.”

Pyongyang’s Delegation

North Korea’s delegation to the Olympics was led by 90 year-old nominal President Kim Yong-nam, one of the few senior North Korean leaders not subject to sanctions, and Kim Jong-un’s 30-year old sister Kim Yo-jong, who was recently promoted to the country’s top decision-making body. Making **the first visit to South Korea by a member of the North’s ruling Kim family**, Kim Yo-jong met with South Korean President Moon four times during the delegation’s three-day visit. The North, however, **proclaimed no interest in meeting Pence**.

Invitation to Pyongyang

During a lunch on Saturday that Moon hosted at the presidential Blue House, **Kim Yo-jong delivered a letter to President Moon expressing Kim Jong-un’s “intention” to improve inter-Korean relations and to meet Moon in Pyongyang in the near future**. If it came about, an inter-Korean summit would be the third of its kind and first since 2007. According to the presidential spokesman, **President Moon responded by saying that the two sides should first establish the right conditions for the meeting**. He called for North Korea to come to the table for dialogue with the US, stressing that such dialogue should take place to improve inter-Korean relations.

US Stance on Engagement

As relations between Seoul and Pyongyang began to thaw, **Pence maintained his distance with the North Koreans and avoided contact** during a brief appearance at the opening dinner. Pence was widely criticized in the South for casting a pall over Moon’s peace Olympics. Returning to Washington, he [told](#) reporters that **the US and its allies, South Korea and Japan, were in complete accord on the need to continue isolating North Korea** over its nuclear weapons program. A senior administration official said Moon did not discuss the North Koreans’ invitation to Pyongyang with Pence, but made very clear that **pressure will not be removed until North Korea takes concrete steps toward denuclearization**. In an [interview](#) with the Washington Post aboard the flight, Pence said the US and South Korea agreed on the terms for further engagement with the North – first by the South Koreans potentially followed by the US. **“The maximum pressure campaign is going to continue and intensify. But if [North Korea] want[s] to talk, we’ll talk.”**

Uncertain Détente

Given the uncertainty surrounding the Olympic thaw in tensions on the Korean peninsula, it remains unclear whether this diplomatic breakthrough will yield substantive progress over North Korea’s nuclear program. **Several points of friction on the horizon include** the US rolling out its **new, strongest ever sanctions on North Korea** (previewed by Pence in Tokyo) as well as the **resumption of delayed US-South Korean military exercises** after the Winter Olympics and Paralympics in late-March. **In response, Pyongyang may resume its nuclear and missile tests**, as it has done after past Olympic détentes. Above

all, **President Trump could disavow Pence's stated willingness to talk, as he has done with Secretary of State Tillerson.**

The situation presents a conundrum for the US-South Korea alliance and for South Korean President Moon, who is working hard to maintain the momentum by considering a North Korean invitation to Pyongyang while also urging North Koreans to sit down and engage in talks with the US. **The apparent relaxation in US conditions for talks with the North could be significant.** However, **going forward, the gap between the Trump administration's emphasis on pressure and Moon's wish to engage will make alliance management difficult despite the two leaders' vows to stand together.**

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