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## **KOREA UPDATE: North Korea Reverts to Hard Line**

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The sudden North Korean cancellation of cabinet-level talks with the South and threats to pull out of the planned talks with President Trump represent reversion to typical negotiating style after weeks of sending mostly positive signals. The pretexts for this abrupt shift appear to be two-fold: the presence of large numbers of high-performance US aircraft in joint military exercises in the South and strong statements by National Security Advisor John Bolton calling for immediate, Libya-style dismantlement of the North's nuclear material and facilities. With regard to military exercises, South Koreans told us that during their meeting with Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader said he had no objections to continuation of routine US-Korea exercises. Up till now, most joint exercises since summity began have been either table-top simulations or largely logistical ground-troop movements. The current exercise, Max Thunder, appears more threatening. The North Koreans may have been provoked by South Korean press reports that the exercise includes scores of attack fighters as well as B-52 strategic bombers. The presence of B-52s would not have been unprecedented but it is hardly "routine." South Korean and US military spokesmen have now denied the presence of B-52s, stating that a joint decision had been made earlier not to bring them to the Peninsula at this time. They acknowledged, however, that F-22 stealth fighter-bombers and other advanced aircraft have been involved and will complete the scheduled exercise.

The North Korean threat to pull out of the Trump-Kim summit was issued in the name of First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-Guan, a 25-year veteran of US-DPRK negotiations who had not been prominently involved in the latest round of talks. My guess is that the North Korean leader is laying down a marker that we can't expect North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program immediately and without concrete changes in the US military posture on the Peninsula. I don't think he is trying to scuttle the summit altogether. In the past the North Koreans have often found pretexts to take umbrage prior to sitting down for talks. They see it as a way to keep us on the defensive and perhaps extract concessions at the outset of negotiations. My guess is that the talks will go on, but we have been reminded that they won't be easy.

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