

# U.S. would support reunified Korean Peninsula — without nukes, State Department says

The State Department said Thursday the U.S. could support North Korea's call for reunification of the Korean Peninsula, but denuclearizing the North is the first priority.

North Korea issued an announcement directed at "all Koreans at home and abroad," calling for better relations with South Korea and "a breakthrough for independent reunification," according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

The statement also said Koreans should reject attempts to brand the North's nuclear weapons program as a hurdle to improved North-South relations.

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State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert told USA TODAY that the United States could support such an outcome "if (the peninsula) arrives at that peacefully."

"We support reunification of the Korean Peninsula," Nauert added.

She stressed that the U.S. goal is a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, and talks between the U.S. and North Korea cannot proceed until that end point is agreed upon. "We're not there yet," she said.

The Trump administration has increased pressure on North Korea, lobbying for new sanctions by the United Nations Security Council and threatening to interdict and inspect ships going to and from North Korea to prevent banned goods from reaching the reclusive country. The increased U.S. attention comes as the North

has stepped up its tempo of nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

North Korea says it seeks a nuclear weapon that can reach the U.S. mainland to deter a possible American attack.

President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un have traded insults, and both leaders have threatened nuclear war.

North and South Korea began direct talks this month ahead of the February Olympic Games in South Korea and agreed to let athletes march and compete under one flag.

North Korea's history of talks with the South and the United States is rife with unkept promises and broken deals.

Pyongyang's announcement called on Koreans to "pave a wide avenue to rosy future of the nation which will be reunified, strong and prosperous!"

The statement said Koreans should "promote contact, travel, cooperation between the North and South," but do so without the help of other countries.

The comments came after China's U.S. ambassador told USA TODAY on Tuesday that his country would support Korean reunification if it's the will of the people there and if it came about through peaceful means that did not result in chaos or a threat to China's national security.

"As long as it's peaceful, it's independent (and) by the Korean people, China will support it," Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai said.

China also seeks a Korean Peninsula without nuclear weapons, Cui said.

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