

## Inside Pompeo's Fraught North Korea Trip

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As U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo touched down in Pyongyang at 10:54 a.m. on Friday he had few details of his schedule in the North Korean capital -- even which hotel he and his staff would stay in.

Not much was clear aside from lunch with counterpart Kim Yong Chol to start filling in the "nitty-gritty details" from the Singapore declaration signed between the leaders of the U.S. and North Korea, according to his spokeswoman Heather Nauert. A handshake with Kim Jong Un, at least, seemed certain.



Mike Pompeo and Kim Yong Chol in Pyongyang on July 7.

Photographer: Andrew Harnik/Pool/AFP via Getty Images

In the end, Pompeo stayed at neither of the hotels where he thought he'd be. The North Koreans took him, his staff and the six journalists traveling with the delegation to a gated guesthouse on the outskirts of the capital, just behind the mausoleum where the bodies of regime founder Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il lie embalmed and on occasional display.

It was the start of a confused visit of less than 30 hours, marked by a pair of lavish banquets that the secretary and his staff appeared to dread for their length and the daunting number of courses presented by unfailingly polite waiters. He only learned of his own schedule hours ahead of time, and the meeting with Kim Jong Un never happened -- despite strenuous efforts from his staff.

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The trip reflects the difficulty for Pompeo in dealing with one of the world's most reclusive and unpredictable regimes, which can shift from threats to warm words and back again at speed. It comes as pressure mounts on him to show progress on the delicate task of getting North Korea to move forward on nuclear disarmament, including the issue of verification, and make good on President Donald Trump's claimed accomplishments from the Singapore summit.



The Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang.

Photographer: Andrew Harnik/AFP via Getty Images

Amid talk of goodwill and Trump's repeated tweets of the bond he has developed with Kim, it was also a jarring reminder that North Korea's approach may not have changed as much as U.S. officials -- and Pompeo in particular -- had hoped. The U.S. is seeking to persuade the world the North Koreans are genuinely prepared to give up the weapons they have developed in the face of years of false starts and broken promises to successive U.S. administrations.

From the moment Pompeo landed in Pyongyang, North Korean officials quickly asserted control. Kim Yong Chol set the optics during their first meeting, which took place around a long wooden table in one of the many conference rooms off the carpeted hallways of the guesthouse complex.

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Normally, media handlers from the host country would let reporters witness the first 30 seconds or so of such a meeting. But Kim's staff allowed reporters to stay for several minutes.



Members of the North Korean military salute the motorcade carrying Mike Pompeo.  
Photographer: Andrew Harnik/AFP via Getty Images

“The more you come, the more trust we can build between one another,” Kim said.

Pompeo, who has yet to gain a taste for such theater, murmured a few pleasantries but quickly lost patience and called on Nauert to usher all media -- North Korean reporters included -- from the room.

Between the many hours of talks, the North Koreans sought to put forward an image of bounty and wealth, an alternate reality in a country where much of the population lives in hunger, lacks electricity and has little to no access to the internet or foreign television.



North Korean service staff at the Park Hwa Guest House in Pyongyang prior to lunch between Pompeo and Kim Yong Chol.

Photographer: Andrew Harnik/AFP via Getty Images

Bearing Fruit

In the guesthouse, each room had bowls of bananas, grapes, oranges and pears that were replenished whenever the occupant was out. The internet speed was fast in each room and the BBC played on flat-screen televisions. In a country laden with the iconography of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, there were no portraits of either man in the compound.

Still, the reminders were there. Guests could roam the grounds and walk a path that surrounded a lake, but were blocked from approaching workers erecting a building nearby. Guards watched surreptitiously from behind a stand of trees.



Mike Pompeo with other US officials on July 6.

Photographer: Andrew Harnik/AFP via Getty Images

The lack of U.S. control clearly rankled Pompeo. A former military officer accustomed to short, focused meetings, he was made to sit through multi-course meals with Kim and his staff, as waiters brought plate after plate of food -- foie gras, turkey, pea soup, boiled oak mushrooms, kimchi, watermelon and ice cream, plus a drink branded "American Cola."

By the morning of his second day, Pompeo had enough. Instead of the elaborate breakfast prepared for him, he ate toast and slices of processed cheese.

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Pompeo speaks with Kim Yong Chol on July 7.

Photographer: Andrew Harnik/AFP via Getty Images

Despite the lack of progress, the North Koreans showed a keen awareness of broader politics in the U.S. under Trump. On the way from the airport, riding in a Dodge Ram van, a minder was noncommittal about what the talks might bring.

“We’ll have to see, like your president says,” he said. He paused and added: “In this van, no fake news?”

The specifics of what happened behind closed doors remain unclear. Whether Pompeo somehow annoyed his counterpart, or pressed too hard, or whether the North Koreans are simply reverting to their hot-and-cold tactics, is hard to say. But the regime made sure to have the final word, and it was not pleasant.

As he was leaving, Pompeo told reporters the conversations were “productive and in good faith.” Hours later North Korean state media issued a statement that did not mention him by name but called the demands he presented “gangster-like.”

Days before the trip began, reporters traveling with Pompeo had to rush to get new passports with a special endorsement allowing entry to North Korea. In the end, authorities in Pyongyang never stamped them and the documents were returned unblemished. It was as if the secretary had never visited at all.