

# From nuclear threats to nuclear talks: A big win for President Donald Trump?

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Ever since the announcement of the summit was made on March 9<sup>th</sup>, US President Donald Trump has hardly been able to hide his eagerness and optimism about his upcoming encounter with the leader of the North Korean regime. For Trump, Kim Jong-un's sudden interest in diplomatic talks on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is the direct result of the US maximum pressure campaign. This belief, in combination with Trump's view of himself as a master negotiator, has led him to think that the US will finally be able to "make a deal on the *de-nuking* of North Korea."

Meanwhile, more skeptical voices have pointed at Kim's increased confidence as the regime is seemingly acquiring operational nuclear missiles that can hit the US mainland. Also, skeptics have underscored the value of these nuclear missiles in forcing Trump to treat Kim like a world leader. After all, no US president agreed to meet with Kim *before* he had them. The picture becomes all the more complicated when one recognizes that both parties may well look at the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in very different ways. For Washington, denuclearization should be complete, verifiable and irreversible. In an ideal scenario, North Korea would simply hand over its weapons and allow international inspectors to verify that the regime is keeping its word. For Pyongyang, however, denuclearization is probably a two-way process. It most likely means mutual steps to get rid of nuclear weapons, including a US commitment to remove its nuclear umbrella over South Korea (and Japan) that it considers a direct threat to its own security. Clearly, many challenges lie ahead for the White House, and the North Korea file remains

US President Donald Trump surprised the world by accepting North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's invitation to talk, thereby setting the scene for potentially the first ever meeting between a North Korean leader and a sitting US president. A Trump-Kim summit, which American officials say will take place this coming May or June at a location yet to be determined, would mark a turning point in US-North Korea relations. After a year of escalating tensions and insults between the two leaders, the prospect of talks seems like a welcome development. Americans have looked at North Korea as the land of lousy options for several decades now, so why not try the unprecedented? Yet, Trump's diplomatic gamble is not without risk. Previous rounds of negotiations have not led to a major breakthrough and have left both sides disappointed. Meanwhile, the increased sophistication of North Korea's nuclear program is forcing the US to come up with answers. Therefore, if Trump does not play his cards right and the summit is perceived as a failure, he may well provide further excuse for the US to turn to military options to achieve what diplomacy could seemingly not.

far from a done deal. Nonetheless, if Trump plays his cards wisely, he might well turn this summit into a diplomatic victory and lay the groundwork for a much-welcomed long-term solution.

As long as the US cannot credibly commit to not threatening the North Korean regime in the future, chances of the latter simply giving up its nuclear weapons are virtually non-existent. At this point, a more realistic goal for the US should be to prevent an open nuclear conflict. Opening up channels of communication are one way of reducing the chances of grave misperceptions leading to a nuclear crisis. Also, the easing of sanctions in exchange for the introduction of a formalization and verification system for Kim's self-imposed nuclear and missile test freeze in combination with a promise to halt all enrichment-related activities could be something to put on the table. The latter would moreover serve a double purpose as it limits the chances of the North Korean regime selling nuclear technology to unfriendly third parties because of economic pressure. If Trump wants North Korea to make concessions, he will have to offer something in return. Alternatively, refusal to back down on any fronts will likely lead to a diplomatic impasse that would be difficult to fix.

The need for the Trump administration to think in positive-sum terms in approaching the yet-to-be-scheduled summit with Kim is closely related to a second issue to keep in mind: expectations management at home. Trump has surrounded himself by staff that appears far from averse to resorting to military action to achieve the US' international objectives. The recent replacement of H.R McMaster with foreign policy hawk John Bolton as National Security Advisor is the latest episode in the ongoing trend of Trump's systematic replacement of the so-called "adults in the room" that have put brakes on some of his more hawkish impulses. As the chance of Trump and Kim reaching some historic deal in their first encounter for the immediate denuclearization of the peninsula is close to zero, it is imperative for the White House to lower the president's and the public's expectations accordingly. In other words, an agreement to a timeframe for future negotiations on denuclearization and normalization of relations should, and rightly so, be perceived as a success. Alternatively, if the summit

fails to produce a significant breakthrough in the eyes of the administration, it risks reinforcing the belief among some that talks are useless and only military options are left.

Finally, Trump's tendency to deal with the world in bilateral and transactional terms is a cause for concern. If the Trump administration wants to make sustainable progress, it will have to keep the bigger picture in mind. Among others, Trump's plan to renege on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – or Iran deal – are bad news for US credibility. The timing is particularly interesting in this regard. Coming May 12<sup>th</sup>, the same month as the expected Trump-Kim summit, is the day on which Trump must either sign a presidential waiver on sanctions on Iran or violate the multilateral agreement. Although he reluctantly extended the life of the deal last January and gave the parties involved a "last chance" to come up with an updated agreement, it remains highly uncertain whether he will be willing to compromise this time as well. Despite many differences in specifics between both cases, the North Korean regime will not fail to draw significant parallels. Furthermore, as a sustainable solution for the Korean peninsula will necessarily include China in one way or another, Trump should refrain from causing too much trouble with the latter. You simply cannot threaten a trade war against Beijing one day, and expect its acquiescence on the North Korean issue the next. Even if Trump himself is inclined to look at the world on a case by case basis (or deal by deal if you will), it is utterly unwise to expect others to do the same.

So, a meeting between Kim and Trump: a big win for the latter? Although significant caution is warranted, the shift from warmongering rhetoric to diplomatic talks should be applauded. If the summit takes place and Trump is willing to compromise, manage expectations and keep the bigger picture in mind, he has the chance to prove that he is indeed the good deal maker he so often claims to be.

## About the author

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