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The Trump-Kim Jong-un Summit: Nuclear Disarmament for Regime Survival?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Kim Jong-un's invitation to US President Donald Trump to hold a summit was a big surprise, as was Trump's immediate acceptance. While the road to a nuclear agreement will be difficult because of two decades of North Korean violations of understandings and agreements, the summit could nevertheless have dramatic ramifications for world and regional politics.

On March 8, 2018, US President Donald Trump received an invitation to a summit with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un to be held by May. He accepted it immediately.

As is characteristic of Trump, he was apparently shooting from the hip, as then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the president had not consulted with him before accepting. (This must have been particularly galling, as, at the end of 2017, Tillerson held secret contacts with North Korea and was berated for it by Trump, who said the era of diplomacy had ended and he was wasting his time.)

The day after the acceptance, the White House posed conditions for the summit: Kim would have to prove with "concrete actions," not just words, that he intends to dismantle his nuclear weapons program. This would entail, first of all, an immediate ceasing of the development and testing of missiles and nuclear bombs. It is not clear what other "concrete actions" the US was referring to or how it can ensure that they are carried out.

The invitation to the summit has stirred controversy both inside and outside the administration. Kim's initiative, which was mediated and encouraged by South Korean and Chinese leaders, is open to different interpretations, some of them contradictory. They range from sophisticated deception tactics to high strategy.

According to the tactical explanation, Kim, like his father, has no intention of dismantling his nuclear program, which has taken up so much effort and so many resources. Instead, the invitation is perceived as a stratagem designed to take advantage of a confused president and administration.

According to this logic, Kim is trying to confound Trump: if the president rejects the invitation, he could be accused of doing nothing to mitigate the danger of a nuclear war; but if he accepts, he would be granting Kim an international status that his predecessors never enjoyed. Certainly the ruler of North Korea would like to drive a wedge between the US and its allies, including South Korea and Japan.

Strategic considerations

In contrast, there are two possible strategic interpretations of the initiative.

The first focuses on Kim's travails. It posits that, as in the Iranian nuclear case, the stiff sanctions imposed on the regime and the ruler's sense that Trump, whom Kim has called crazy and unstable, would really carry out his threats to attack and destroy his country have prompted him to pursue negotiations and a settlement.

According to the second strategic interpretation, Kim is acting out of strength. He is taking an opportunity to fluster a president who is having troubles at home and does not understand international relations. Kim's object is to score immediate gains such as legitimacy for his regime, the lifting of sanctions, substantial economic aid, and the cancellation of imminent US-South Korean military exercises. The longer-term gain he seeks is the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea and the preservation of his draconian rule.

It appears that the US has adopted the first strategic explanation. Its spokespersons emphasize the success of the sanctions and war threats and highlight Kim's supposed readiness, at least on the declarative level, to dismantle his nuclear weapons. Yet this may well be a mistaken assessment. Kim might be playing chess – and seeing several moves ahead – while Trump plays checkers at best.

It is not impossible that an agreement can be reached. The two flamboyant leaders, who have threatened one another with a war of nuclear annihilation, might both be seeking a ladder with which to climb down from the tree. If Kim's main concern is to ensure his regime's survival, and if having nuclear weapons is motivated solely by that desire, the solution could be an American demand for complete nuclear disarmament under international supervision, along with a commitment to refrain from nuclear development in the future, in return for a promise not to try to overthrow the regime.

This would not be an original solution. In October 1962, similar terms brought an end to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous nuclear crisis of the Cold War era. In return for the removal of nuclear missiles that the Soviet Union had deployed in Cuba, the US agreed to cease military efforts to oust Fidel Castro's communist regime.

History of treaty violations

Negotiating and coming to terms with North Korea is very problematic in light of its long history of systematically violating agreements. In 1985, North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and in January 1992 it undertook, in a joint declaration with South Korea, to refrain from developing nuclear weapons. But just as Iran is doing today, it continued to develop a nuclear infrastructure and experiment with ballistic missiles, leading the US to impose sanctions upon it. In 1994, the Clinton administration signed a framework agreement: a freeze on nuclear development and an intention to dismantle all that already existed in return for economic aid and the lifting of sanctions. But whereas the US honored its commitments, North Korea breached the agreement. In 2002 it withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

A breakthrough was seemingly achieved in 2005 at the Six-Party Talks, which included the US, China, Japan, Russia, and the two Koreas. At those talks, North Korea undertook to dismantle its nuclear weapons. Yet that agreement, too, collapsed amid disagreements over implementation and supervision, as well as continued missile tests.

It cannot be determined at this point whether or not the Kim Jong-un initiative is any different from his father's policy of misleading other parties and violating agreements.

A disarmament agreement in return for the ruler's survival is also problematic from a moral and practical standpoint. We have already had an agreement of that kind: the one that stipulated the dismantlement of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons in return for his survival. He indeed survived, but continued to use chemical weapons against his people. North Korean nuclear disarmament in return for ensuring the survival of its ruler would bestow legitimacy on one of the world's cruelest and most oppressive regimes.

Effects on international and regional politics

The mere fact of a meeting with the US president will be an achievement and a huge political and international gain for Kim. No serving American president has ever met with a North Korean ruler. (Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang in 1994, but he no longer president.)

In return for agreeing to the summit, Trump could demand and perhaps receive important commitments and concessions from Kim. Trump touts

himself as an experienced and highly skilled negotiator who can strike “deals” in difficult conflict situations, like the Israeli-Palestinian one. But this assertion requires proof.

Negotiations between North Korea and the US could have repercussions for the Iranian nuclear program and hence also for Israel. For years North Korea has been cooperating with Iran in developing and upgrading missiles and nuclear technology. For years Iran has been observing efforts to stop the North Korean nuclear program, and, seeing how they failed, reasonably concluded that it too can achieve a nuclear capability that the West can perhaps delay but not halt. If the US and its allies manage to put an end to North Korea’s nuclear program and bring about its dismantlement, the chances of putting an end to Iran’s program will increase as well. If not, the result will be the opposite: Iran will be encouraged to continue its path towards the bomb.

If the summit between Trump and Kim were to result in an agreement to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear program, it would mark one of the most dramatic turnabouts in the history of international relations. Certainly it would warrant the Nobel Peace Prize for the leaders, unlike the one that was given to Obama for nothing.

The international relations arena has seen many turnabouts from conflict to settlement. US president Richard Nixon went to China for a historic rapprochement with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao Zedong, and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat came to Jerusalem for a summit with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin that laid the groundwork for the historic Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

But these breakthroughs were preceded by extensive preparations, secret missions by envoys, arduous bargaining, and drawn-out negotiations. These elements are lacking from the US-North Korea equation. The path to nuclear disarmament and peace is still long and winding, and the timeframe is not realistic.

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