



PERSPECTIVES

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The Korean Peninsula: Peaceful Change or Back to Square One?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 840, May 21, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Korean summit between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in was full of encouraging optics, but it is too early to declare the success of the upcoming Trump-Kim summit a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, there is reason for optimism.

The Korean summit that took place on April 27, 2018, at which Kim Jong-un met with Moon Jae-in, was a historic event. For the first time since the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1948, a North Korean leader crossed the DMZ to the South to meet with a South Korean president. Prior to this summit, President Kim Dae-jung (in 2000) and President Roh Moo-hyun (in 2007) visited Pyongyang and met with Kim Jong-il (Kim Jong-un's father). Kim Jong-il was expected to visit the south, but this visit never took place due to the nuclear and missile crisis.

The Korean summit in April was carefully orchestrated to demonstrate harmonious relations between the leaders and the potential for peace. The crossing of the DMZ and the "smiling diplomacy," as well as the intimacy the leaders projected, shattered some of the demonized images and psychological barriers that prevailed before the summit. However, while supporters of the summit saw it as the beginning of a peace process that would include denuclearization of the Peninsula, conservatives remain skeptical. To them, the summit was just a tactical maneuver by Kim to gain time and financial assistance without giving up his nuclear weapons.

Although North and South Korea can begin implementing parts of what was agreed to during the summit, the main issues remain dependent on the outcome of the upcoming summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump.

That summit could lead the Peninsula to peaceful coexistence, but it also has the potential to reignite military tensions.

Two important questions will determine the summit's outcome, and both concern the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. First and foremost: Will Kim Jong-un make the strategic decision to give up Pyongyang's nuclear weapons in return for guarantees and economic assistance from Trump, or is he manipulating everyone by offering only tactical concessions? If Kim refuses to offer a credible proposal that includes surrendering the North Korean nuclear arsenal with a verifiable mechanism, the summit will fail. Should that occur, one can expect President Trump to impose harsh economic sanctions on Pyongyang, and he might even consider employing the "bloody nose" tactic as punishment.

The second question concerns President Trump's expectations. What would he consider a successful summit? If Trump expects Kim Jong-un to give up his nuclear arsenal on the spot, the summit will likely fail. But if he is willing to agree to a gradual process of denuclearization that includes both carrots and sticks and that enables the US to guarantee that Pyongyang is not cheating, there is room for optimism.

In any agreement with North Korea, Washington should take into account the failure of the Syrian case. President Barack Obama declared that Syria had given up all its chemical weapons, but Damascus cheated by keeping part of its chemical arsenal. Its retention of both hardware and knowhow allowed it to continue its chemical attacks on the rebels. This failure should serve as a cautionary tale for Washington in any agreement it makes with Pyongyang.

There is reason to be at least partly optimistic. President Trump is highly unlikely to have agreed to attend the summit with Kim Jong-un without the knowledge that an agreement between Washington and Pyongyang has already been discussed and agreed to.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family