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The Third Trump-Kim Meeting

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The G20 summit was held on June 28-29 in Osaka, Japan. North Korea's Kim Jong-un was not present, but he was visited by US President Donald Trump immediately after the summit. The meeting was remarkable for its symbolism and its implications, but most responses to it were colored by prior perceptions of Trump.

The third meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un took place after the US president tweeted an invitation to Kim to meet him in South Korea. His June 29 tweet read: "After some very important meetings... I will be leaving Japan for South Korea (with President Moon). While there, if Chairman Kim of North Korea sees this, I would meet him at the Border/DMZ just to shake his hand and say Hello(?)!". "Chairman Kim of North Korea" saw the tweet, and the two met the next day. Before the meeting, Trump toured the DMZ in the company of President Moon. He then crossed the border for a short time and met with Kim. He was the first serving American president to visit that land.

Many commentators who responded to this meeting made it abundantly clear that they are primarily influenced by their love for, or hatred of, President Trump. The success or failure of the meeting can be best determined by assessing the symbolism and implications of the event.

The meeting, which was the leaders' third encounter, was presented as a spontaneous visit between friends. Whether or not it was truly unplanned does not matter. The importance of the meeting lies in the message the two leaders were trying to send, and which they appeared to want to send in unison. That message is that Trump and Kim are on good terms and can work together.

In some quarters, the American president received praise that he has been able to establish a close relationship with the president of one of the most isolated

countries in the world. Others note the extreme cruelty of the Kim regime and begrudge Trump the legitimacy he affords it by normalizing relations through meetings such as these. Yet other commentators accuse Trump of neglecting Japan and South Korea, both old and important allies of the US. Those two countries are the most threatened by North Korea, which is estimated by American intelligence to possess about 50 nuclear warheads. Japanese PM Shinzō Abe and South Korean President Moon now have no choice but to align themselves with Trump's approach and hope the negotiations bear fruit.

In terms of image, Kim has nothing to lose from these meetings. He runs his country with an iron fist and controls the media, which will report all such meetings in a manner that suits his interests. Trump has more complex factors to consider. The 2020 election is fast approaching, and much of the American media as well as many others who are repelled by Trump can be expected to excoriate his every move. Of course, knee-jerk criticism, rather than damaging or deflating Trump, seems to encourage him.

Trump's son Eric posted a collage on Twitter showing two images: Barack Obama in 2012, peering into North Korea from the southern side of the DMZ from behind armored glass, accompanied by soldiers and security guards; and his father warmly shaking Kim's hand as Kim smiles. In addition to highlighting the two presidents' radically different approaches to Pyongyang, the friendly image of Trump and Kim can be perceived as a weapon in Trump's struggle with China. The fact that Trump is operating so comfortably in Beijing's backyard is an insult to the Chinese, who consider themselves at least partly responsible for the countries in their immediate vicinity.

Imagery and symbolism notwithstanding, the fact remains that the three meetings have not yet resulted in a formal commitment by North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program. Nor is it clear if this will ever happen. The US continues to maintain sanctions and pressure. During the meeting, Trump said, "The [US] sanctions remain, but I am in no hurry." He appears confident that he has managed to find a way to calm the decades-long struggle between the two halves of the Korean peninsula.

In the diplomatic world, which is full of ceremony and symbolism, the two leaders have succeeded at crafting a dialogue. The fact that this dialogue is relentlessly criticized suggests more about the critics than about Trump. With that said, the president should emphasize that the US continues to guarantee the security of South Korea and Japan. He would also be wise to include China in the dialogue, which is taking place within its sphere of influence.

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