

Why Kim and Trump both stand to win in historic U.S.-North Korea summit

It's official: the highly-anticipated nuclear summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump will take place on June 12 in Singapore. It will be the first time any North Korean leader has come face-to-face with a serving President of the United States. No one knows quite what to expect.

In the past, North Korean leaders have used protracted negotiations to extract repeated concessions, one carrot at a time. Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, drew out six-party talks with the United States, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan for six years, from 2003 to 2009.

The previous talks initiated by Kim Jong-il and Bill Clinton in 1994 lasted eight years before collapsing when George W. Bush named North Korea the third member of his "axis of evil" in 2002. Both sets of talks netted North Korea millions of barrels of crude oil in exchange for supposedly freezing its supposedly peaceful nuclear plans—to no avail.

But if history is on Kim's side, time is on Trump's. From comparing the size of their nuclear buttons in early January to an agreement to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula just two months later, events have been moving forward at Trump speed. Strong economic sanctions are tightening the noose around the Kim regime, and a series of less-than-successful weapons tests has left North Korea friendless as well as poor.

Kim's position became untenable at least a year ago, when he lost the support of China's President Xi Jinping (if in fact he ever had it at all). In response to China's increasing willingness to support—and enforce—U.S. economic sanctions, Kim bet everything last year on the success of his nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Unfortunately for Kim, those programs seem to be failing. Kim's final nuclear test last September seems to have caused the collapse of his main nuclear testing facility, and North Korea's first and last test of a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in November may not have been quite the success it was cracked up to be.

Chinese whispers

Whatever the status of his weapons programs, they don't scare China, and China is the key to security on the Korean peninsula. Historically, it was China that defended Korea against Japanese aggression, successfully in 1592 and unsuccessfully in 1894. Both times the final battle lines were drawn halfway between Pyongyang and Seoul, almost exactly where the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South sits today.

Today's DMZ is a relic of the last Korean War of 1950-53, when United Nations forces (led by the United States and based mainly in Japan) fought off first a North Korean and then a Chinese invasion of the South. It was the Soviet Union that green-lighted North Korea's attempt to unify the Korean peninsula by force, but it was China that intervened to save the Kim regime from U.S. General Douglas MacArthur's counterattack, at the cost of more than half a million lives.

Since then Russia has given on-again, off-again support to North Korea, but China has become the reclusive country's key patron. Just one railroad bridge connects North Korea to Russia, and reports are that the tracks are encrusted with rust. China, by contrast, is North Korea's economic lifeline to the world. The problem for Kim is that these days China needs South Korean and Japanese investment much more than it needs a bellicose but bankrupt ally.

So it is no coincidence that when Kim Jong-un started to talk turkey on denuclearization and peace, he went to China to consult his erstwhile allies. A secretive armored train carried Kim to Beijing to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in March, and the two leaders followed up with a more conventional meeting in northeast China's Dalian on May 7-8. Kim needs Xi's support for whatever comes next, and almost certainly what Xi wants is peace.

That message came through loud and clear after three-way talks among Chinese, Japanese and South Korean leaders May 9 in Tokyo. Kim's only

neighbor that's not actively conspiring against him is Russia. And Russia is in no shape to support North Korea on its own.

Pompeo's pursuits

Meanwhile Donald Trump's new Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, late of the CIA, has twice visited Pyongyang, most recently returning with three captive Americans as a gesture of goodwill from the North Korean government. Pompeo, a man not known for subtlety, accidentally got Kim's name wrong at his pre-visit press conference. But he seems to know what he wants from North Korea, even if he doesn't always know who he wants it from.

Pompeo is a longtime defense hawk who has consistently argued for aggressive sanctions to bring North Korea to the bargaining table. So when Pompeo praises his North Korean host at a press conference in Pyongyang as "a great partner" who will "make sure our two leaders will have a summit that is successful," the world should take notice. If even Pompeo is on board the peace train, it's almost certainly going somewhere.

Pompeo has promised a better deal with North Korea than the one then-President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State John Kerry negotiated with Iran in 2015. Donald Trump withdrew from that deal on May 8. The deal severely limited Iran's capacity to enrich uranium but did not completely shutter the country's nuclear program. Trump and Pompeo are unlikely to accept anything less than a full shutdown from North Korea.

Needed elsewhere

If he does agree to give up his nuclear and missile programs, Kim will be looking for tangible security guarantees in return. One option is a reduction in the number (and armament) of U.S. troops based in South Korea. Though pundits have repeatedly warned against a troop withdrawal as a dangerous give-away to the North, the fact is that U.S. troop withdrawals have been on the agenda ever since the Carter administration.

Donald Trump has said that he won't reduce the U.S. troop presence on the Korean peninsula in advance of his talks with Kim Jong-un, but he has made it clear that all options are on the table. A reduction in U.S. troops levels might even be the President's preferred bargaining chip, one he has reportedly ordered the Pentagon to consider.

The U.S. Army in particular is likely to be pleased at the prospect of giving up guard duty in the DMZ. The stationing of static defensive forces as a kind of “trip wire” across the Korean peninsula is an inefficient use of U.S. military resources that are in constant demand to meet crises all around the world. A draw-down of U.S. troops in Korea might be just as popular in the Pentagon as in Pyongyang.

Let’s make a deal

The details of a possible Trump–Kim deal, if there even is going to be a deal, are still unknown. But there is at least a good chance that the seemingly never-ending North Korea crisis may finally be winding down. All signs are that Kim wants a deal—a deal that could make his country (and his dynasty) more stable, more secure and potentially much richer. And Trump would certainly love to come home a winner.

The geopolitical reality is that Kim doesn’t need nuclear weapons, and Trump doesn’t need boots on the ground in South Korea. So if they can get the political optics right, they can put the relationship right. Trump and Kim may be unlikely political bedfellows, but no more so than Reagan and Gorbachev, or Nixon and Mao. And if they can get along in Singapore, the whole world will sleep just a little bit easier at night.

Salvatore Babones

[Return Home](#)

Viewed using [Just Read](#)