

ISSUE BRIEF

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Pitfalls in U.S. Rush to North Korean Summit

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President Donald Trump's rapid acceptance of dictator Kim Jong-un's surprising summit invitation is yet another stunning development in a whirlwind of diplomatic breakthroughs since the beginning of the year. Within a few short months, the Korean peninsula has shifted from a seemingly inevitable military clash to the cusp of a momentous first-ever meeting of U.S. and North Korean leaders. Pyongyang has seemingly reversed its long-standing resistance to abandoning its nuclear arsenal.

But the regime's offer comes with heavy strings attached and merely reflects a willingness to return to square one of previous negotiations. All previous attempts at diplomacy with North Korea have failed, so there is good reason to be skeptical and wary.

The first U.S. summit with a North Korean leader is considered the highest coin in the diplomatic realm, and President Trump spent it without leveraging any concessions from Pyongyang, such as the release of the three Americans being held captive. As the Administration prepares for the summit, it needs to play a more strategic game rather than focusing on historic "Nixon going to China" optics. Since assuming power, Kim Jong-un has not left North Korea, and may be wary of traveling overseas. Panmunjom—the Demilitarized Zone border site where the April

inter-Korean summit will occur would also be a logical place for the U.S.–North Korean summit. Alternatively, Beijing or another location in China might be acceptable to both sides.

Seoul Tees Up Summit Diplomacy

Fearful of a provocation or even North Korean attack during the Winter Olympics, South Korean President Moon Jae-in eagerly grabbed the olive branch offered annually by the North Korean regime during its New Year's Day speech. Once inter-Korean discussions began, however, the objective shifted from merely preventing provocations to broader tension reduction and inter-Korean reconciliation efforts.

U.S. policymakers and experts worried that President Moon was overeager in his pursuit of diplomatic engagement with the regime. Washington fretted that Seoul's acquiescence to North Korea's Olympic charm offensive conveyed legitimacy to the regime and risked undermining international resolve to maintain pressure. Vice President Mike Pence was dispatched to South Korea to counter the perceived North Korean propaganda victory.

The U.S. counseled its ally to move forward cautiously and only after lengthy preparations. The Trump Administration should take its own advice before it is seduced by the same siren song. President Trump's decision to accept Kim Jong-un's invitation so quickly was impetuous. Only hours before the U.S. acquiescence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had commented, "We're a long way from negotiations, we just need to be very clear-eyed and realistic about it."¹

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<http://report.heritage.org/ib4828>

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High-Risk Gamble

Trump supporters will argue that the President's business acumen and negotiating prowess will carry the day in a mano-a-mano match with Kim Jong-un. But such claims sound disturbingly like the end of the Clinton Administration, when some officials proclaimed that the strength of the President's personality would enable the U.S. to achieve all of its objectives in a direct meeting with then-North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

Thankfully, wiser heads prevailed. After U.S. diplomats determined that Pyongyang was unwilling to discuss the parameters of a missile agreement, President Bill Clinton declined the invitation for a summit photo op. President George W. Bush never considered a summit with North Korea, despite years of Six-Party Talks negotiations during his term. When President Moon received his summit invitation at this year's Olympics, he deftly demurred and used envoys to first negotiate North Korean concessions prior to agreeing to a meeting.

Pyongyang has not yet publicly affirmed the South Koreans' description of their meeting with Kim Jong-un. Instead, North Korean media provided a more limited readout of the meeting, omitting any mention of denuclearization pledge.² Days earlier, a North Korean official had declared that his country was "compelled to possess a nuclear deterrent in order to protect its sovereignty and the security of its nation from the harsh hostile policy and nuclear threat of the U.S."³

The South Korean delegation indicated that Pyongyang's summit offer was conditioned on "the safety of its regime [to] be guaranteed and if military threats against the North were removed." Over the years, North Korea has provided a long list of security, diplomatic, and economic demands, including withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Korea, abrogation of the U.S.-South Korea defense treaty, ending the U.S. extended-deterrence guaranty, and removal of all U.S. and U.N. sanctions.

What the U.S. Should Do

President Trump has two months to prepare for a summit hampered by a policymaker roster with critical vacancies and thin on Korean expertise.

The Administration should:

- **Move quickly to fill policymaker vacancies**, particularly the U.S. ambassador to South Korea and the State Department special representative for North Korea policy, and appoint a senior envoy to coordinate U.S. policy on North Korea and serve as high-level interlocutor.
- **Insist that attending the summit meeting should be contingent on a pre-summit agreement on an agenda that addresses U.S. and allied security concerns, and clearly delineates the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea as the end goal.** Past diplomatic efforts with North Korea foundered on short, vaguely worded agreements that allowed both sides to claim differing interpretations as to what was agreed upon as well as insufficient verification measures.
- **Counter any calls for reducing sanctions to "improve the atmosphere for negotiations,"** as has frequently occurred under past Administrations. The international pressure campaign is working, and sanctions must be maintained and strengthened as long as Pyongyang continues the behavior which triggered them. Indeed, the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act Section 401 allows the suspension for up to one year of U.S. sanctions only if North Korea has made progress on several delineated issues.
- **Engage in the annual Foal Eagle/Key Resolve military exercises with South Korea**, which were postponed so as to not conflict with the Olympics and Paralympics. The exercises play an important role in maintaining allied deterrence

1. Nick Wadhams, "U.S. Is a 'Long Way' from Talks with North Korea, Tillerson Says," Bloomberg, March 8, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-08/u-s-is-a-long-way-from-talks-with-north-korea-tillerson-says> (accessed March 12, 2018).

2. "Kim Jong Un Meets Members of Delegation of Special Envoy of S. Korean President," Uriminzokkiri, March 6, 2018, <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?lang=eng&ftype=songun&no=9646> (accessed March 12, 2018).

3. "It Is Legitimate Right to Increase National Defense Capability: DPRK Permanent Representative," Uriminzokkiri, March 3, 2018, <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?lang=eng&ftype=document&no=9600> (accessed March 12, 2018).

and defense capabilities and should not be sacrificed as diplomatic bargaining chips.

- **Propose discussions on confidence-building and security-building measures** to increase transparency of North Korean and allied military forces and reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula. These would include both military and non-military components. However, denuclearization remains the key objective.
- **Call on Pyongyang to show its commitment to progress** by releasing the three U.S. captives, announcing its return to the Korea War armistice, the 1992 inter-Korean denuclearization accord, and Korean agreements of non-aggression.

The Path Ahead. The diplomatic path with North Korea is well-trod with many previous failures. That is not to say the U.S. should not try again, but it is prudent to be cautious in trusting reports of regime reversals of policy. Pyongyang has repeatedly dashed the hopes of those advocating engagement. Perceived movement is habitually followed by threats, cancellations, and demands.

Even as the U.S. and North Korea resume engagement, Pyongyang will continue to augment and refine its missile and nuclear capabilities. North Korea is nearing completion of its ability to target the American homeland with nuclear weapons, which some have advocated would be justification for U.S. military action. There could be reason for optimism, but the U.S. has to keep its eyes open, its shield up, and its sword sharp.

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