

North Korea: Not Another Summit Until Progress at Working-Level Talks

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Three meetings between Trump and Kim have made no progress on denuclearization, and differences between both sides remain irreconcilable without major concessions.

The Administration should not agree to another summit without significant progress at the working level, nor should it agree to partial denuclearization or peace declarations.

The United States should work with regional allies on responding to North Korean provocations, resume military exercises when feasible, and resolve troop funding disputes.

The United States and North Korea have both indicated a willingness to hold another summit meeting while concurrently downplaying its likelihood. Pyongyang rejects working-level meetings that would lay the necessary groundwork for a detailed agreement, although Secretary of State Michael Pompeo commented that bilateral communication has occurred.

Rampant speculation continues, however, of either a significant North Korean provocation or an abrupt summit to sign a minimalist denuclearization accord or a symbolic peace treaty before the U.S. presidential election.

The United States should coordinate with South Korea and Japan on a common response if Pyongyang carries out its threats to resume nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests. Washington and Seoul should also discuss resuming cancelled military

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exercises once COVID-19 conditions allow as well as resolve stalemated Special Measure Agreement negotiations over the reimbursement costs for stationing U.S. forces overseas.

The Trump Administration should not acquiesce to partial denuclearization agreements or peace declarations that provide only the illusion of progress without resolving the North Korean nuclear, missile, and conventional forces threats.

Instead, Washington should continue pressing Pyongyang for discussions with Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, who remains the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea. There is insufficient time before the U.S. presidential election to craft a sufficiently detailed agreement that would justify another summit meeting.

U.S. Conditionally Willing to Meet

President Trump stated that “I understand [Kim Jong-un wants] to meet and we would certainly do that...if I thought it was going to be helpful.” He added he thought a summit would probably be successful since “I have a very good relationship with him.”¹ Trump declared that he would make a deal with North Korea “very quickly” if reelected in November.²

Secretary of State Pompeo, however, commented that another summit was unlikely before the U.S. presidential election “unless there’s something they can accomplish.” He expressed hope for such a meeting but stipulated that there would need to be “a significant step along the way towards the world’s objective of denuclearizing North Korea.”³

Pompeo added that the United States was seeking senior-level discussions but needed “a willing partner, and the North Koreans have chosen at this point in time not to engage in a way that can lead to a potential solution.”⁴

North Korea Slams the Door on Negotiations

After the collapse of the Hanoi summit in 2019, Pyongyang adopted increasingly harsh rhetoric against the United States. Consistent North Korean themes were downplaying the relevance of the Kim–Trump relationship, personally criticizing Trump, rejecting future negotiations, and threatening provocative action during the run-up to the U.S. presidential election.

Increasing Irrelevance of Leader Relationship. By the beginning of 2020, North Korea was no longer describing the strong personal relationship between Kim and Trump as a catalyst for resolving the nuclear issue. In

January, Kim Kye-gwan, Special Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, affirmed Kim Jong-un's "good personal feelings about President Trump" but they are separate from bilateral relations and "there will never be such negotiations as that in Vietnam."⁵

Foreign Minister Ri Son-gwon stated that "there is nothing of factual improvement to be made in the [bilateral] relations simply by maintaining personal relations between our Supreme Leadership and the U.S. President."⁶

Regime Willingness to Criticize Trump. After the Singapore summit, North Korea blamed the lack of subsequent progress on the political atmosphere of the 2018 U.S. mid-term elections, conservative critics, and U.S. officials including Secretary of State Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton. But even as the regime continued to describe the leaders' relationship as good, subordinate officials became more critical, even insulting, of Trump.

Ri Su-yong, vice chairman of the Central Committee of the Korea Workers' Party, described Trump as anxious, fretful, and feeling "fear inside." Ri warned Trump that he "had better accept the status quo that he has sowed so he should reap and think twice if he does not want to see bigger catastrophic consequences [and should] quit abusive language which may further offend" Kim Jong-un.⁷

Kim Yong-chol, chairman of the Korea Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, described Trump as "an old man bereft of patience.... [A] heedless and erratic old man, the time when we cannot but call him a dotard again may come [and] every word made by him is heard with derision."⁸

Dismissing Potential for Negotiations. After the last working-level meetings in October 2019, Pyongyang declared it had "no intention to hold such 'sickening negotiations'"⁹ unless the United States substantially altered its policy. Foreign Minister Ri Son-gwon dismissed the potential for another summit meeting: "Never again will we provide the U.S. chief executive with another package to be used for achievements without receiving any returns."¹⁰ In July 2020, Kwon Jong-gun, director-general of the North Korean Foreign Ministry's Department of U.S. Affairs, affirmed, "We have no intention to sit face to face with the U.S."¹¹

Threats of Provocative Action Before U.S. Election. Since last year, Pyongyang has repeatedly referenced the 2020 presidential election¹² and may threaten to resume nuclear and ICBM tests to induce additional concessions from President Trump. North Korea may assess that President Trump would seek a landmark agreement with North Korea to bolster his re-election chances. Such a belief by the regime could lead it to alternate

offers of engagement with provocative actions in an attempt to induce changes in Washington's negotiating position.

Kwon Jong-gun warned that "the U.S. had better hold its tongue...not only for U.S. interests but also for the easy holding of upcoming presidential election."¹³

Pyongyang Reopens the Door a Sliver

Kim Jong-un's increasingly powerful sister Kim Yo-jong has, in recent months, adopted a more public persona as the "bad cop" of the regime. She almost singlehandedly ratcheted up tension with South Korea earlier this year only to have Kim Jong-un suspend the full-range of threats.

In July 2020, she turned her attention to the United States in a lengthy personal statement¹⁴ that affirmed several hardline regime positions, though in somewhat softer tones, while coyly holding out the possibility of resumed negotiations. Her statement, like the earlier roller coaster of tensions with South Korea, was likely intended to induce greater efforts by Washington to offer terms amenable to the regime and thereby increasing the potential for a return to negotiations.

Kim Yo-jong recommends against another summit with Trump this year, instead advocating that North Korea augment its nuclear arsenal. However, her unspoken message, as with the recent regime threats against South Korea, is that her brother could overrule her with a softer policy.

Kim Yo-jong repeatedly dismissed the importance of a summit, arguing it would only be useful to the United States. She charges that the ongoing U.S. attempts to resume negotiations is only to "buy time by calming us down and tying us down so as to prevent political disasters in [U.S.] relations" with North Korea.

Her cavalier dismissal of any benefit to North Korea and listing of conditions signal that the U.S. would have to pay a heavy price for securing another summit meeting by putting more on the table than Washington did in the Hanoi summit. She urges the United States to abandon the "pipe-dream" of "partial lifting of sanctions versus the permanent dismantlement" of the Yongbyon nuclear facility.

She explains that North Korea's new negotiating paradigm, and accompanying cost, is much broader. The previous theme of "denuclearization measures versus lifting of sanctions" should be changed into a formula of "withdrawal of hostility versus resumption of DPRK-U.S. negotiations." North Korean denuclearization requires major changes by both sides, and the lifting of sanctions no longer qualifies. Instead Pyongyang requires a fundamental transformation of U.S. policy.

Interestingly, she walks back the recent harsher North Korean criticisms of the personal relationship between Kim Jong-un and Trump, even suggesting that the non-occurrence of the provocative event that the U.S. had been fearful of was due to the “unique friendly relations” between the two leaders.

That said, the good relations between the leaders would not alter North Korea’s tactics or nuclear program. She believes that Pyongyang should strengthen its nuclear capability rather than consider the leaders’ personal relations.

Most importantly, after all of Kim’s polite derision of a summit, she still allows for its possibility, though she firmly leaves the ball in Washington’s court. It is not necessarily that “denuclearization is not possible [but only] that it is not possible at this point of time.”

Laying the groundwork for Kim Jong-un to play the “good cop,” she states, “It is still my personal opinion, however, I doubt that things like the DPRK-U.S. summit talks would happen this year [but] a surprise thing may still happen, depending upon the judgement and decision between the two top leaders.”

Yet, at the same time, she resurrects North Korea’s threat of provocative action of “receiving a Christmas gift on the eve of the presidential elections, which it hasn’t received so far.”¹⁵ She conditions the future path of U.S.-North Korean negotiations and relations on positive U.S. behavior.

Kim Yo-jong provided a lengthy list of U.S. actions that could precipitate a strong response by the regime. Potential U.S. triggering behavior include ill-disposed words, economic pressure or military threats, dangerous and threatening speeches, and pressing on human rights. Though not mentioned, presumably allied military exercises would also be included as justification for a strong North Korean reaction.

Potential for Provocation

Throughout 2019 and into 2020, North Korea hinted at taking action that would raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In late December 2019, Kim Jong-un announced that he no longer felt bound by his promise to President Trump to not conduct nuclear or ICBM tests. Instead, Kim warned that North Korea will “shift to a shocking actual action to make [the United States] pay for the pains sustained by our people” and counseled that “the world will witness a new strategic weapon to be possessed by the DPRK in the near future.”¹⁶

Subsequent to the Stockholm negotiations in October 2019, North Korea referenced a recent U.S. ICBM test and warned that it could “give tit for tat.”¹⁷ Throughout 2019, Pyongyang affirmed Kim Jong-un’s admonition

that regime patience lasts only until the end of the year, when the prospect of settling issues becomes “gloomy and very dangerous.”¹⁸

In December 2019, North Korea announced two tests at its long-range missile test site that would “further bolster up the reliable strategic nuclear deterrent.”¹⁹ No details were provided, but experts assessed the tests to be for a new ICBM or an improvement to an existing ICBM. Satellite imagery also indicates that North Korea continued production of ICBMs in 2020.²⁰

North Korea may reveal a new system or conduct a long-range missile launch on October 10 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Korea Workers’ Party, one of North Korea’s most important holidays. The regime typically marks key dates with military parades. Satellite imagery of the Mirim Parade Training Ground, the staging point for North Korea’s military parades, shows construction of several large vehicle storage buildings that are large enough to house mobile launchers for ICBMs.²¹

Now Is Not the Time for a Summit

Three meetings between President Trump and Kim Jong-un failed to break the logjam on denuclearization. Kim Jong-un showed himself to be no more willing than his predecessors to abandon North Korea’s nuclear weapons or offer more than the Yongbyon nuclear facility again. The differences between the two sides remain unbridgeable without major concessions by one or both sides. Prior to the talks collapsing last year, negotiators could not even agree on basis terms such as *denuclearization* or *Korean Peninsula*. According to U.S. officials, the North Korean negotiator was authorized to speak about everything but denuclearization.

North Korea rejects additional working-level meetings and has been highly critical and dismissive of Secretary Pompeo. Kim Yo-jong’s recent statement reflects a willingness to deal with Trump again but on highly conditional terms. Pyongyang may perceive that President Trump is willing to accept a minimalist agreement that could be extolled during the campaign season.

President Trump remains the most significant wild card for an unexpected summit meeting. In March 2018, Trump immediately accepted South Korean recommendations that he meet with Kim Jong-un even prior to consulting with his advisors on the decision. He rejected the expert consensus recommendation to condition the initial Singapore summit on developing a denuclearization framework. At the summit, he unexpectedly announced a cessation of allied military exercises. The second summit in Hanoi was undertaken despite no progress having been made

in working-level meetings. Trump's third meeting, at the Korean border site at Panmunjom, was the result of a presidential tweet followed by minimal planning.

What Washington Should Do

During earlier meetings with North Korea, the U.S. delegation was willing to discuss a peace agreement, which has long been a North Korean objective. There are rumors that the United States is considering new proposals, including sanctions relief for less than full denuclearization. Both of these options would appear to be breakthroughs but would actually be more advantageous to North Korea while significantly undercutting U.S. policy.

Rather than accepting flashy symbolic gestures, the Trump Administration should:

- **Reject additional summit meetings without an agreement.** The low-hanging symbolic fruit of initial summits has been picked. Subsequent summits should be reserved for formalizing an agreement worked out by diplomats or in-depth leader negotiations based on meticulous and well-planned policy positions.
- **Continue seeking working-level diplomatic meetings with Pyongyang.** U.S. diplomats should meet with their North Korean counterparts to determine the conditions under which the regime would comply with the 11 United Nations resolutions that require the regime to abandon its nuclear, missile, and biological/chemical warfare in a complete, verifiable, irreversible manner.
- **Push for a comprehensive road map to denuclearization.** The United States should not lower the bar to achieve progress. Any denuclearization agreement should include an unambiguous and public commitment from North Korea to the abandonment of its nuclear and missile production capabilities and existing arsenals, a detailed delineation of requirements for all parties, linkages to benefits to be provided, sequencing, and timelines for completion.
- **Require a robust verification protocol in any agreement,** including data declarations of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and arsenal, provisions for the dismantlement of those facilities, and destruction of the regime's arsenals of weapons of mass destruction.

There should be inspections and long-term monitoring of declared facilities, as well as the right to conduct short-notice challenge inspections of non-declared facilities. A data declaration should occur in the initial phase of implementation.

- **Reduce sanctions when the triggering activity has abated.** U.N. resolution sanctions and U.S. punitive measures were imposed in response to North Korean violations. The U.S. should not relax pressure as an inducement before Pyongyang has addressed its previous actions. While any agreement would be implemented sequentially, the overall parameters should be agreed upon prior to a relaxation of pressure.
- **Not sign a peace declaration.** Such a document would be a historic but meaningless feel-good gesture that would have no tangible benefits and do nothing to improve the security situation on the Korean Peninsula.²² Instead, Washington should articulate the necessary conditions for a formal peace treaty, the linkages of required actions by all parties, and what is and is not included in these conditions, which should include significant progress toward North Korean denuclearization and the reduction of the conventional force threat to South Korea. A peace treaty should be the end point of conventional arms control negotiations rather than the opening gambit to improve relations with Pyongyang.
- **Respond when North Korea violates U.N. resolutions.** The United States downplayed North Korea's 26 missile violations in 2019 (the most ever in a year) as well nine missile violations in March 2020 (the most ever in a month). Any future North Korea violation, particularly a nuclear or ICBM test, should trigger stronger Trump Administration enforcement of U.S. laws, which, to date, has been lacking.
- **Coordinate North Korea policy with Seoul and Tokyo.** South Korean President Moon Jae-in has appointed a new national security team that has already indicated it will seek "creative" ways to provide benefits to North Korea while skirting international sanctions. Washington should privately counsel Seoul against this and, if necessary, again reach out to South Korean banks, businesses, and government agencies to remind them of existing laws and the penalties for violating them.

- **Resume military exercises in South Korea when COVID-19 conditions allow.** Two years of cancelled and constrained military exercises have not induced diplomatic progress with Pyongyang nor any reciprocal decrease in North Korea military activity. While it is understandable to curtail military exercises given the rising number of COVID-19 cases among U.S. military personnel, doing so further compounds the degradation in military readiness.
- **Uphold human rights principles.** Downplaying North Korean human rights violations to gain diplomatic progress runs counter to U.S. values and sets a poor precedent for negotiations. The North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act, Section 104(a)(5) mandates sanctions against any person who knowingly facilitates severe human rights abuses.²³

Conclusion

North Korea's threat last year of a "Christmas gift" of a nuclear or ICBM test could become this year's "October surprise" on the eve of the U.S. presidential election. Pyongyang has also indicated a willingness to return to negotiations. Both options are not mutually exclusive and could be implemented sequentially.

The United States should remain open to a negotiated diplomatic resolution to the long-standing North Korean nuclear problem. But Washington should avoid being over-eager to grab at a tempting diplomatic agreement that does not reduce North Korea's military threat but could lead to reduced U.S. pressure or military deterrence in South Korea. As the United States continues pressing for a well-crafted comprehensive agreement, it should maintain current force levels in South Korea and Japan.

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