



THE UPCOMING TRUMP-KIM SUMMIT: WHAT TO EXPECT?

By
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

May 10, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



After more than a year of heightened tensions between the US and North Korea whereby the leaders of the two countries exchanged heated threats and counter threats, the two leaders have agreed to meet. The breakthrough in relations came through as a result of South Korean diplomatic efforts in March 2018.

South Korean delegation, led by National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong, met with Kim Jong-un in the headquarters of the Korean Worker's Party who expressed willingness to talk about denuclearization and extended an invitation to Trump for a summit meeting.¹ The delegation then delivered the message to the US president who agreed to meet Kim, thus setting the stage for the first-ever presidential-level US-North Korea summit in late May or early June.

Since then there has been a lot of speculation on when and where the Kim-Trump meeting will take place. Possible places for the meeting have ranged from Singapore, to Panmunjom also known as the "Truce Village" along the demilitarized zone, to Pyongyang. There has also been speculations - which can broadly be divided into optimistic and pessimistic - over what to expect from the summit. The pessimistic strain of speculations fear that the meeting could quickly turn into a disaster if there is no willingness on North Korea's part to talk about denuclearization, which could perhaps lead to a

¹ "Trump accepts invitation to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un," *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korean-leader-kim-jong-un-has-invited-president-trump-to-a-meeting/2018/03/08/021cb070-2322-11e8-badd-7c9f29a55815_story.html?utm_term=.e0b499ef0e46

quick deterioration of relations and may perhaps lead to war.² President Trump himself indicated at joint news conference alongside Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the start of a two-day summit on April 17, 2018 that he was prepared to walk away if the talks were not “fruitful”.³ “Hopefully (the meeting between Trump and Kim) will be a great success and we’re looking forward to it.”⁴ The optimists think that North Korea would agree to dismantle its nuclear program in return for economic incentives, security guarantees and diplomatic recognition. As a goodwill gesture for the upcoming talks with Trump, Kim is already contemplating releasing three US hostages held by North Korea.

The venue for the summit may already have been decided. According to reports, South Korean President Moon Jae-in has convinced Kim Jong-un during the inter-Korean Summit to hold his upcoming meeting with US President Donald Trump at the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas.⁵ Although there have been reservations on the part of the advisors to the US president on the venue who would have preferred a more neutral venue, President Trump seems to like the proposed meeting place.⁶

What can be expected of the upcoming summit? This partly depends on what expectations are held by the two sides. The Trump administration, as well as previous US administrations have repeatedly made it clear that they seek complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea.⁷ If the US adheres to this line, then the summit and diplomacy might not go well. North Korea, on the other hand, seeks global recognition, an end to its diplomatic and economic isolation, and security guarantees. The summit would hinge on whether North Korean leader is serious about dismantling his regime’s nuclear weapons and missiles program, as well as what he would demand from the US in return.

It is highly unlikely that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons program for diplomatic recognition and some paltry economic incentives at this point. Over the years, it has stated the example of Libya that gave up its nuclear program and weapons and only eight years later Moammar

² Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang, "The Trump-Kim Summit and the Truth About North Korean Denuclearization," *The Diplomat*, March 15, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-trump-kim-summit-and-the-truth-about-north-korean-denuclearization>

³ Meredith Mcgraw, Trump will remain 'flexible' about summit with Kim but will leave if not 'fruitful' *ABC News*, April 18, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-remain-flexible-summit-kim-leave-fruitful/story?id=54555116>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Kim Jong Un agrees to meet Donald Trump at DMZ, source says," *CNN*, May 1, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/30/asia/trump-kim-summit-dmz/index.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Acton, "Korea’s Nuclear Nightmare Hasn’t Gone Away," *Foreign Policy*, May 2, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/02/koreas-nuclear-nightmare-hasnt-gone-away/>

Qaddafi was killed and a similar fate for Iraq and Saddam Hussain. Given this line of thinking, Kim would never give up a nuclear program that North Korea has spent decades building. However, if the US shows flexibility, adjusts its expectations and does sufficient groundwork, it could yield positive results such as a sustained freeze in North Korean nuclear testing and development work on ballistic missiles, along with other confidence building and non-proliferation measures.

The US has already started preparations for the upcoming summit. On April 18, the CIA Director Mike Pompeo met with Kim in an effort to lay the groundwork for the prospective meeting with the American president.⁸ South Korean diplomacy too has been invaluable in easing tensions with North Korea. It all started with the 2018 New Year address of Kim Jong-un where he offered to reach out to South Korea. That move started a diplomatic chain of events starting from North Korea sending a delegation to the winter Olympics held in South Korea in February 2018 and an inter-Korean summit at the end of April 2018, that has now paved the way for the first summit between the sitting leaders of the US and North Korea. The inter-Korean summit culminated with the two countries vowing to formally end the war and agreeing to work towards the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."⁹

The summit between the two Koreas has laid the groundwork for upcoming Kim-Trump summit, and South Korean diplomacy has played a big part in making that happen. The important thing for policy makers to bear in mind is to have moderate expectations. One summit will not commit North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program. However, if the US shows enough imagination and flexibility to bring North Korea to even freeze its nuclear program, it would be considered enormous progress which will reduce the risk of war and help stabilizing the Korean Peninsula. South Korea has made giant steps in improving relations with the North, and which have indeed been a turning point in their relations.

However, the real challenge that lies ahead is for President Trump and Kim Jong-un to try and build on the successes achieved between the two Koreas.

⁸ "CIA Director Pompeo met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un over Easter weekend," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/us-china-trade-dispute-looms-over-trump-summit-with-japans-abe/2018/04/17/2c94cb02-424f-11e8-bba2-0976a82b05a2_story.html?utm_term=.4208dabaaafc

⁹ "North and South Korean leaders hold historic summit: Highlights," *CNN*, April 27, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/asia/live-news/north-korea-south-korea-summit-intl/>