A Trump-Kim Summit: Hyper Rapprochement or Marginalization of China?

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There is growing diplomatic momentum in the denuclearization process of the Korean Peninsula between the historic summit meeting between South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un, held on April 27, and the upcoming meeting between U.S. president Donald Trump and North Korean leader late May. Back in March, the surprise announcement of Trump’s acceptance of Kim Jong-un’s offer of a meeting led many observers to conclude than China had been marginalized on the Korean Peninsula issue. However, Kim’s visit to Beijing on March 26 suggests that claims of Beijing’s marginalization are likely to be overstated. The success of the rapprochement between the United States and North Korea will depend on whether the two countries can reach consensus on nuclear disarmament, and how China and Russia react to any possible agreement between Washington and Pyongyang.

Introduction

In mid-April 2018, the Washington Post revealed Mike Pompeo director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and incoming Secretary of State had visited Pyongyang over the Easter weekend; met with North Korean leader, and discussed five possible locations for the expected Trump-Kim summit either in late May or early June; and none of them in the United States. The list includes Ulaanbaatar capital of Mongolia; the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea; a neutral European capital like Stockholm or Geneva; a location at sea like Jeju Island or a ship; Southeast Asia, including possibly Singapore or Malaysia. It is most likely to take place at the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas.

Trump also indicated his administration had been in direct talks with North Korea at “very high levels”. (1) After meeting South Korean envoys at the White House on March 8, Trump indicated his acceptance of an offer from North Korea’s Kim Jong-un for a meeting between the two leaders. (2) The announcement of the meeting caught the world by surprise,
because prior to accepting the invitation in December of the previous year, the United States had just been pushing for tougher sanctions at the United Nations, including significantly reducing North Korea’s oil imports, repatriating North Korean workers, and mandating inspections of North Korean ships. (3) In late February, the U.S. Treasury Department proposed a list of sanctions against North Korea—which included 27 shipping companies, 28 vessels, and one individual—reflecting the continued deterioration of U.S.-DPRK relations. (4)

Jim Walsh, senior research associate at the MIT Security Studies Program and board member of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation was elated and horrified at the same time; “Elated because the parties are talking; horrified by the prospect of the two most unusual leaders in the world together in a room—what could possibly go wrong?” (5) Other analysts have expressed concern if the summit does not fulfil its expected détente. As Mark Bowden wrote in his “A Trump-Kim Summit: ‘Why the Hell Not?’” article published in the Atlantic, “The downside to such a summit is all too real. If it fails to produce a breakthrough, where does the game go from here? It could well lead to ramped up threats and heightened chances for a calamitous war.” (6)

**North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests**

Since 1984, North Korea has carried out more than 150 missile and nuclear tests. Over half have been since 2011, when Kim Jong-Un came into power.

[Image: North Korea's nuclear and missile tests chart]

[Sources: Al Jazeera, Agencies, CSIS, 38 North]
The participation of North Korea in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics marked a thaw in inter-Korean relations. However, it was also widely reported that the United States was concerned with the inter-Korean rapprochement. Most notably, Vice President Mike Pence ignored the North Korean delegation at the Olympics ceremony; and told reporters on a flight back to the United States that: “There is no daylight between the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan on the need to continue to isolate North Korea economically and diplomatically until they abandon their nuclear and ballistic missile program.” In this context, Trump’s sudden acceptance of Kim’s offer of talks caused surprise and consternation among scholars and experts.

However, an even more dramatic development occurred on March 26 when Bloomberg News reported on Kim Jong-un’s surprise visit to China. The visit was officially confirmed by China on March 28 following Kim’s departure from the country. This was a major surprise, because prior to the visit there was no news that China and North Korea were making any preparations for Kim’s visit to China, while both U.S. and South Korea governments appeared unaware of the planned visit. At the time, most observers were focused on the political implications of the US-DPRK summit, and many analysts believed that China would be the biggest loser of the summit.

China had strengthened its sanctions against North Korea, but now found that its influence had suddenly been marginalized by the US-DPRK summit. The unexpected news of Kim Jong-un’s visit to China, however, produced an immediate 180-degree turn in these assessments. In fact, it seems that China had not really been marginalized. Xi Jinping, rather than Trump, was the first world leader to meet with Kim Jong-un. Whether China has become a more active rather than passive player on the Korean Peninsula, or whether the meeting between Xi and Kim was just a countermeasure to the meeting between Trump and Kim, remains an unanswered question.

**Hopes and Challenges**

The Kim-Moon summit has set the foundation for a peace and reconciliation process between the Koreas. The final communiqué of the summit has outlined several positive steps, including putting an end to "hostile activities" between the two nations, changing the demilitarised zone (DMZ) that divides the country into a "peace zone" by ceasing propaganda broadcasts, vowing to arms reduction in the region pending the easing of military tension, holding four-way talks involving the United States and China, organising a reunion of families left divided by the war, connecting and modernising railways and roads across the border, and encouraging joint participation in sporting events, including this year’s Asian Games.
However, the most complex issue remains North Korea’s nuclear program. It has evolved from whether North Korea has the ability to develop nuclear weapons to whether North Korea has the ability to deploy long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles, and to the current nuclear disarmament issue. This development underscores the strategic shift of the North Korean leadership toward realism since Kim Jong-un’s assent to power.\(^{15}\) In other words, once North Korea became a nuclear power, the country has sought to upgrade its position in the international system to that of equal status with other major powers through nuclear deterrence. Kim Jong-un argues that the international community should acknowledge this new reality and give North Korea fair treatment as a nuclear power in its negotiations.\(^{16}\)

From a strategic perspective, this can reasonably explain why North Korea ignored international norms before becoming a nuclear power, but once successful, has shown surprising flexibility. Yet, this development has confused international observers on the question of Kim Jong-un’s leadership style: before acquiring nuclear weapons, Kim Jong-un was an irrational tyrant who was trying to confront the entire world; but after acquiring nuclear weapons, he became a successful diplomat and rational leader.\(^{17}\) It is difficult to simply attribute this change to Kim Jong-un’s personal qualities. Instead, they likely reflect Kim Jong-un’s long-planned neo-realist strategy.\(^{18}\)

Since assuming power in 2012, Kim Jong-un has pursued fast-track development of the country’s nuclear capabilities in order to show the world that North Korea possesses
nuclear weapons that are truly threatening. This was a race against time, because Kim showed he was willing to face global condemnation in order develop nuclear weapons, gambling on two political assumptions. First, the United States would not take direct military action against North Korea. This assumption is based on an anti-war sentiment in South Korea as well as the strong opposition of China.(19) Second, the remaining participants in the Six-Party Talks, the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea, would not achieve genuine cooperation on the Korean Peninsula issue. Even though the United States, Japan and South Korea seem to have a stable alliance, there are many hidden conflicts due to divergent goals, not to mention the many controversies in the foreign policy arena between the United States, China and Russia.(20)

These factors gave Kim Jong-un the confidence to speed up his nuclear program. From this perspective, Kim Jong-un has already survived the most serious challenge to his rule. The United States has not dared to take military action, making the sanctions of the U.S. and its allies meaningless. In addition, the efforts at promoting agreement between the United States, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea on sanctions against North Korea have made slow progress. Despite the fact that North Korea’s biggest supporter, China, has seriously considered implementing UN sanctions, North Korea proposed the Trump-Kim summit, showing that Kim Jong-un believes that DPRK has succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons, and that it is now able to use its position as a nuclear power to negotiate with other countries and dismantle the current sanctions regime imposed by the international community on North Korea.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRg4Isp8ySU

Is China In or Out?

After the White House agreed to the Trump-Kim summit, some experts felt this political overture implied the marginalization of China on the Korean Peninsula issue.(21) There was no sign that China had prior knowledge of the proposed meeting. In addition, China had reinforced border controls at Dandong and increased sanctions against North Korea in May 2017.(22) As a result, China seemed to have been left out of the rapprochement process between the United States and North Korea. What explains the indifferent attitude that the United States had toward the North Korean delegation during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, and Kim’s secret visit to China less than 3 weeks after the news of the Trump-Kim summit?

If the announcement of the Trump-Kim summit made China appear marginalized, why did Washington fail to see Kim Jong-un’s strategy of holding peace talks during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, and why did it also fail to predict the meeting between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping in advance? In order to answer the question of whether China has been marginalized, we need to take a more comprehensive long-term view. China is still the most important pivotal actor in the strategic game between Kim Jong-un and the
United States and its allies. Kim Jong-un does not necessarily need China’s full support, but he cannot completely marginalize China’s influence. On the contrary, Kim makes use of competition between China and the West in order to gain the best possible outcome from negotiations.

Since 2012, Kim Jong-un’s foreign policy strategy has focused on obtaining credible nuclear weapons at the fastest possible speed. After acquiring nuclear weapons, Kim has tried to undermine the sanctions imposed by the United States, Japan, South Korea, China, Russia, and the United Nations. The key to resolving the North Korea issue was the United States, China and Russia joining forces to impose sanctions and prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, China has failed to commit to ending the Kim Jong-un regime soon enough, and after North Korea acquired nuclear capabilities, China realized that it was too late. As long as North Korea can prevent the convergence of positions between the United States, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea - which is the critical precondition for credible sanctions - Kim can always try to divide those countries; and conduct asymmetrical bilateral relations, while breaking down the sanctions regime against North Korea, one country at a time by utilizing its nuclear power status.

Besides the successful breakthrough in relations with South Korea expressed via Moon Jae-in’s friendlier attitude at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, North Korea has successfully exploited Trump’s speculative businessman approach and has arranged the upcoming summit meeting. For China, North Koreans used an early secret meeting to make Beijing feel respected and valued. Certain media reports speculated that North Korea is actively seeking opportunities to meet with leaders of Russia and Japan as well. (23) Observers have indicated that China’s role has not been marginalized and that China’s influence should not be exaggerated. Following North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, Kim is likely to pursue equidistant, bilateral, and asymmetric relations with every country that aims at exploiting the disagreements between China, the United States and Russia to maximize their own interests in negotiations.

**A Nuclear-free North Korea?**

It is hard to imagine Kim Jong-un taking the huge risk of developing nuclear weapons just in the hope of reaching a political settlement with the United States and China. If that was his only purpose, he could have held talks with the international community as soon as he consolidated his domestic position. Obviously, Kim Jong-un’s calculation of political interests is based on the position of his country in the international system. In addition to the recognition of his regime’s non-interference in the country’s internal affairs, it is highly likely that the international community will be asked to provide unconditional economic assistance and preferential treatment. (24)
In exchange for these benefits, it can be expected that the international community will demand that North Korea unconditionally dismantle its nuclear weapons and accept the supervision and inspections of international organizations. However, by agreeing to these demands, North Korea would lose its main bargaining chip. So long as this fundamental contradiction is not resolved, it will be difficult for Kim Jong-un to work with the leaders of major powers to resolve this issue, and that is why experts speculate that Kim prefers a phase-out approach while Washington prefers “the Libyan model of disarming before lifting sanctions”.(25)

However, compared with a Kim Jong-un that has no nuclear weapons, the flexibility and initiative demonstrated by North Korea today during its negotiations have already shown that although Kim Jong-un will not actually be able to use nuclear weapons, his acquisition of nuclear power has markedly improved his confidence in international political affairs and diplomatic negotiations. This psychological effect may have a far greater impact than North Korea’s actual nuclear weapons power.

Will there be a hyper rapprochement among all members of the Six-Party Talks on the Korea Peninsula issue in the future? It is hard to draw a firm conclusion before the Trump-Kim summit. However from the inter-Korea talks and the talks between Xi and Kim that have already taken place, we can see that at Kim Jong-un has expressed his willingness to discuss the denuclearization of North Korea. Neither South Korea nor China produced any specific resolutions on this issue after their meetings with Kim Jong-un, indicating that the significance of these two meetings was mainly as symbolic ice-breaking rather than making substantive progress on resolving the Korea Peninsula issue.

Prior to agreeing to the Kim-Trump meeting, the United States had previously insisted on North Korea’s commitment to abandoning its nuclear program. If Trump is merely trying to increase his personal diplomatic achievements and compromises on demands for North Korea’s unconditional nuclear abandonment, this may seriously hurt the Republicans’ chances in the upcoming mid-term elections in November 2018 as well as Trump’s prospects for a 2020 re-election. These are major issues that the two governments need to resolve before the summit is held. For the hyper rapprochement to succeed, the first challenge is for the two countries to reach a consensus during the summit. The second challenge is the reactions of China and Russia to any bilateral agreement reached at the summit, with follow-up bilateral and multilateral negotiations and agreements between North Korea and the major powers. Therefore, the success of the Kim-Trump summit and the contents of any agreement will affect the future development of the Korean Peninsula issue.
In addition to the key position of the United States, the roles of Russia and China are very intriguing. From the perspective of great power politics, the United States is currently confronting both Russia and China at the same time. For Russia, the key issues are involved with issues of Ukraine, Syria, and the recent mutual expulsion of diplomats by Russia and Western countries. For China, conflicts include the South China Sea dispute, the Sino-US trade war, and the containment of China’s rising power. These conflicts between the United States, Russia and China have prevented the three great powers from presenting a united front against North Korea. What makes the picture even more complicated is that the other two main parties involved, Japan and South Korea, have territorial (Kuril Islands dispute) or security disputes (THAAD dispute) with Russia and China, respectively.

These conflicts have given Kim Jong-un the opportunity to sow division between major powers in their response to North Korea and undermine their international sanctions. Unless the United States, Japan, South Korea, China, and Russia can temporarily set aside their differences and reach a real consensus on the issue of North Korea, we should expect that that North Korea will never actually give up its nuclear weapons. Instead, it may claim a willingness to abandon nuclear weapons while in fact retaining its nuclear capability, or at least retain the capacity to resume its nuclear capability within a short time frame. Most importantly, North Korea will use constant negotiations to obtain international guarantees for the maintenance of the Kim dynasty.

The Art of the Tri-lateral Bargaining
The North Korea problem has turned into a tri-lateral bargaining game between Kim, Trump, and Xi. While South Korea and Japan certainly have huge stakes, both countries have limited policy space which is largely constrained by the United States strategy.
Russia, on the other hand, plays an independent role to balance the influence of China and the U.S. on the North Korea issue, acting tough against DPRK when Kim pushed his brinkmanship by advancing the nuclear program but supporting Kim secretly when China showed signs to of fully implementing sanctions against the DPRK. The upcoming Trump-Kim summit and its subsequent international reaction, particularly China’s response, will provide the real showdown for the North Korea issue. Their success or failure hinges on whether Kim, Trump, and Xi can ultimately reach agreement when they finally show their hands and the strength of their desire to reach compromise.

What exactly does Kim want from the U.S. and China? How can Kim balance U.S.-China strategic competition while at the same time maintaining his independence from China and satisfying the U.S. and its allies? A new report from Hankyoreh indicates that Kim is willing to discuss the denuclearization of DPRK based on the following five conditions: "U.S. removes nuclear and strategic assets from South Korea, halt their deployment during joint military exercises with Seoul, guarantee Washington will not conduct a conventional or nuclear attack, normalize diplomatic relations [with North Korea] and sign a peace treaty replacing the 1953 armistice agreement."(26)

These demands, if genuine, represent the concessions Kim will demand from Washington in exchange of denuclearization, and translate into a simple goal: the United States makes peace and guarantees the security of the Kim Dynasty by its continuing presence in the peninsula to balance Russia’s and China’s influence. Without the American support, Kim will continue to be unable to escape the sphere of Russian and Chinese influence. After all, these two countries have bailed out North Korea against the UN sanctions over recent years.

Trump might find the alleged five conditions acceptable if North Korea commits to comprehensive denuclearization. In fact, Trump has repeatedly expressed his foreign policy preference towards the Monroe Doctrine.(27) Kim’s alleged proposal, provided that North Korea is willing to genuinely give up nuclear weapon in advance and allow international inspections to oversee the denuclearization process, does sound appealing. Under this scenario, the rapprochement between North Korea and U.S. and its allies might stand a chance to succeed.

The real challenge, undoubtedly, comes from how China views Kim’s intentions and the resultant strategic gain or loss. The prospect for a hyper-rapprochement is much brighter if China values a denuclearized DPRK more than its strategic loss of influence over the DPRK as it becomes increasingly aligned to the U.S. and its allies. Otherwise, China is likely to show strong opposition and respond with counter-measures that prevent a strategic partnership between the U.S. and DPRK.

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