

North Korea's Diplomatic Strategy, 2018

Mark Tokola

With an outbreak of diplomacy under way for the Korean Peninsula, a review of North Korea's approach to negotiations is timely. A summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in was held on April 27. President Trump has accepted an invitation to meet with Kim Jong-un.¹ The secretive nature of the North Korean state makes it difficult to assess how it will engage with and what it expects to gain from talks with the international community—not just with the United States and South Korea, but with China, Japan, Russia, the EU, and others. However, its past behavior, official statements, the testimony of defectors, and the expert opinion of North Korea watchers can provide helpful insights.

This chapter presents a brief history of talks and agreements with North Korea prior to the inauguration of Trump, followed by an overview of North Korea's diplomatic outreach in 2018 to date. It then presents indicators as to what North Korean diplomacy may look like through the rest of the year based on assessments of its stated and implicit objectives—ends it would wish to attain in any event, either through diplomacy or by coercion. I conclude with a list of key upcoming dates and scenarios describing how North Korean diplomacy may play out for the remainder of 2018.

North Korea's recent diplomatic moves mark an abrupt policy change. During 2017, it carried out in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions three test flights of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs); conducted its fifth and sixth underground nuclear tests, the latter being the most powerful to date and almost certainly thermonuclear; threatened an “unimaginable attack” against the United States;² and officially announced that it would “never give up its nuclear weapons.”³ If North Korea is indeed now willing to negotiate denuclearization with the United States and South Korea, its diplomacy can at least be described as agile.

North Korean Diplomacy in 2018, So Far

The history of talks and agreements with North Korea is monotonously one of pledges made and then broken, a roller-coaster of optimism and disappointment. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il proved effective extractors of concessions from South Korea and the United States through diplomatic means, but never achieved their goals of replacing the Korean War armistice with a peace treaty and achieving diplomatic normalization.⁴ While 2017 was marked by provocative weapons tests and threats of war from both North Korea and the United States, 2018 has begun with an apparent thawing of relations and re-energized diplomatic efforts on all sides to diminish tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Much has been written on the diplomatic outreach of the Moon Jae-in administration and possible U.S. responses to North and South Korea's efforts. However, Kim Jong-un's moves and motives should be further explored.

Kim Jong-un's New Year's Address

Kim Jong-un's annual address delivered on New Year's Day 2018 was directed as much towards an international audience as it was to the people of North Korea. It presented a strikingly conciliatory tone towards South Korea and welcomed the Olympic Games in Pyeongchang:

“As for the Winter Olympic Games to be held soon in south Korea (authors note: in North Korean official parlance, ‘south’ is merely an adjective in regard to the Republic of Korea, not part of its name), it will serve as a good occasion for demonstrating our nation’s prestige and we earnestly wish the Olympic Games a success...Since we are compatriots of the same blood as south Koreans, it is natural for us to share their pleasure over the auspicious event and help them.”⁵

Kim went on to state that the auspiciousness of 2018 as the 70th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK as well as the year in which South Korea hosted the Olympic Games presented an opportunity to “improve the frozen inter-Korean relations and glorify this meaningful year as an eventful one noteworthy in the history of the nation.” He called for easing military tension and for the promotion of “bilateral contact, travel, cooperation and exchange on a broad scale to remove mutual misunderstanding and distrust, and fulfill their responsibility and role as the motive force of national reunification.”⁶

Kim Jong-un also announced in his address that North Korea had accomplished “the great, historic cause of perfecting the national nuclear forces...a powerful and reliable war deterrent, which no force and nothing can reverse.”⁷ Kim stated that, vis-a-vis the United States, “[t]he whole of its mainland is within the range of our nuclear strike and the nuclear button is on my office desk all the time.” As for the future of the DPRK nuclear and missile programs, Kim stated that it was time to “mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, the power and reliability of which have already been proved to the full, to give a spur to the efforts for deploying them for action.”⁸ This suggests that the weapons programs have reached a stage at which the North Koreans believe no further launches or detonations are necessary strictly from an engineering sense. If that is the case, the absence of further testing should not necessarily be taken as for the purpose of diplomatic outreach. North Korea may consider it wholly within its right to engage in “mass production” of missiles and nuclear warheads even as talks are ongoing.

Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

Following the New Year’s Day address, talks were held between North Korean and South Korean negotiators at the border village of Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone (DMZ). North Korea offered to send a delegation of athletes, a cheering squad, and a performance-art troupe to the Winter Olympics in South Korea.⁹ The two countries agreed to march under a “united Korea” flag and to field a joint women’s ice hockey team. The “Olympic Peace” served both sides’ short-term interests. South Korea received assurance that North Korea would not attempt to disrupt the Winter Olympics. North Korea was able to demonstrate that it was not isolated within the international community and received 600 all-expense paid vacations for Kim loyalists to attend the games and to visit South Korea.

The North Korean delegation at the talks included North Korea’s nominal head of state, Kim Yong-chol, who acted as chair of the delegation, and Kim Jong-un’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, who delivered an invitation to Moon Jae-in to meet with Kim Jong-un. South Korea’s former vice foreign minister from 2012-2013, Kim Sung-han, stated that “North Korea clearly appears to be winning the [diplomatic] gold...Its delegation and athletes are getting all the spotlight, and Kim Jong Un’s sister is showing elegant smiles before the South Korean public and the world. Even for a moment, it appears to be a normal state.”¹⁰ U.S. vice president Pence also attended part of the games but received mixed reviews for his studied seriousness.

A Third Inter-Korean Summit

Since the end of the Winter Olympics in late-February, North Korean and South Korean negotiators have held a series of working-level meetings culminating in the announcement on March 28 that the third inter-Korean summit will be held on April 27 at the border village of Panmunjom. Another working-level meeting will be held on April 4 in preparation. The two previous inter-Korean summits held between Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung in 2000 and Roh Moo-hyun in 2007, respectively, were in Pyongyang.¹¹ The agreement to hold the 2018 inter-Korean summit at the Peace House on South Korea's side of Panmunjom is significant in breaking with the past pattern of inter-Korean summitry.

ROK unification minister Cho Myoung-gyon stated that "Both sides will continue working-level discussions (on the agenda) while focusing on the issues surrounding the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the stabilization of peace and the development of relations between the South and North."¹² The March 5-6 inter-Korean meetings, held in Pyongyang at the headquarters of the Korean Workers' Party with a high-ranking delegation, was significant for being the first known instance of Kim Jong-un meeting with South Korean officials, and the first high-level South Korean visit to North Korea in a decade.¹³ The South Korean delegation was led by National Security Chief Chung Eui-yong, and included South Korea's chief of the National Intelligence Service, Suh Hoon. North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) hailed the meeting as an "openhearted talk" focused on "improving the North-South relations and ensuring peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula."¹⁴ Kim Jong-un reportedly told the South Korean delegation that he wants to "write a new history of national unification."¹⁵

Offer to Meet President Trump

The South Korean delegation led by Chung Eui-yong then traveled to Washington, D.C. on March 8 to brief the White House on the delegation's meeting in Pyongyang and delivered an unwritten invitation from Kim Jong-un to meet with Trump. After the debriefing, Chung spoke to reporters outside of the West Wing and said that Kim Jong-un had "expressed his eagerness to meet President Trump as soon as possible," and that Kim is "committed to denuclearization" and would "refrain from any further nuclear or missile tests."¹⁶ Chung also said that Kim Jong-un had expressed understanding that joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises would move forward this year,¹⁷ marking a break from past North Korean calls to end the military exercises. The White House and Trump confirmed later that day that a meeting was "being planned."¹⁸

Joshua Pollack told CNBC that "The South Koreans have been pushing the North Koreans to interact with the Americans, so it may be the case that Kim made the gesture of an invitation to demonstrate his good faith to the South Koreans, not expecting that it would go anywhere...So I suspect that Kim also may have been surprised."¹⁹ Lisa Collins also told CNBC that "North Korea may have been surprised by Trump's immediate acceptance of the offer to hold a U.S.-DPRK summit and may be carefully planning a response...or they could also be dragging out their answer to create even greater suspense and drive more attention to the issue. The intense focus on the summit outcome could then be used as bargaining leverage for negotiations."²⁰

It is possible that the Kim regime is remaining silent “to play psychological games with its adversaries in a bid to create leverage,” as Bryan Harris has reported for the *Financial Times*.²¹ Harris in his article also highlights the precarious position that Kim Jong-un may be facing in relaying to South Korean envoys, and later to Xi Jinping, his willingness to discuss denuclearization. Jeon Young-sam of South Korea told the FT that “For us, nuclear bombs are a strategic military weapon. For North Koreans, the nuclear concept is almost equivalent to religion. It is a psychological safeguard for them...So it is risky for the regime to announce a meeting with the US and to say that it is now on the path to de-nuclearization. The betrayal would be huge for North Korean people as they have long cherished the nuclear program.”

DPRK Foreign Minister Visit to Sweden: March 15-16

DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho visited Sweden from March 15-16 for talks with Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallstrom. The Swedish government's press release on the talks stated that they would “focus on Sweden's consular responsibilities as a protecting power for the United States, Canada and Australia. They will also address the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, which is high on the Security Council agenda. Sweden is a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2017-2018.”²² The specifics of the meeting between the two foreign ministers were uncertain. Jim Hoare, Britain's former charge d'affaires in Pyongyang, said, “The Swedes have this long-established presence in North Korea, so since the 1990s, they've particularly looked after US interests...[T]here is a long record of Sweden interacting with North Korea on behalf of the Americans. There is this tradition, this link.”²³

One possible reason for the meeting, given the timing, was that North Korea may have been considering whether the proposed meeting between Trump and Kim Jong-un might be held in Sweden, particularly given Sweden's history of neutrality. Second, it was long rumored that Sweden was acting on behalf of the United States to secure the release of the three U.S. citizens most recently imprisoned in Pyongyang. The release of Otto Warmbier in 2017 was mediated by Swedish diplomats. Such a demonstration of good will on behalf of North Korea would put them in a favorable negotiating position, possibly even to receive sanctions relief. Either way, Trump likely would feel the need to reciprocate.

Then again, it would not be shocking if Ri Yong-ho may have been sent to discuss whether Kim Jong-un might receive the Nobel Peace Prize for this year's spate of diplomatic engagements. Former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 “for his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular.”²⁴ As outlandish and unlikely as this may seem—given the Kim regime's well-documented human rights violations and crimes against humanity—Kim Jong-un may view the possibility as no more than his due.

Kim Jong-un's Visit to China

Kim Jong-un made a visit to Beijing, his first known trip outside of North Korea since he took power in December 2011 after the death of his father, Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il held a meeting in 2000 with President Jiang Zemin before an inter-Korean summit in June. With

Kim Jong-un's summits scheduled with Moon Jae-in and Trump, there are several possible reasons for why the North Korean regime might have felt that a visit to China was necessary. First, as with the meetings with the South Korean and U.S. presidents, the meeting with Xi Jinping plays into Kim Jong-un's push to present himself as a world leader—advantageous both at home and abroad. It would have seemed bizarre to have met with Trump before he met with Xi Jinping. Second, Xi has met with Trump and may have advice for Kim Jong-un on how to handle his meeting to maximize North Korean gains. Trump has expressed his admiration for the Chinese leader. Kim might have benefited from Xi's advice on how to conduct himself in a meeting with Trump.

Third, China is North Korea's only ally and its largest trading partner. It is in North Korea's interest to create the appearance that it has China's backing before going into a meeting with South Korea and the United States. Reaffirming the alliance may offer Kim Jong-un a way of offsetting his disadvantageous position vis-a-vis the U.S.-South Korean alliance. Fourth, Moon Jae-in has been pursuing a trilateral meeting between South Korea, Japan, and China. Having Moon meet Xi and not having Kim meet Xi would have set North Korea at a diplomatic disadvantage. Fifth, Kim Jong-un may also have been looking for an assurance from Xi that North Korea would not face tougher sanctions were talks with South Korea and the United States to collapse and North Korea publicly resumed developing its missile and nuclear capabilities.

Lastly, summits with South Korea and the United States present Kim Jong-un with the opportunity to reset North Korean relations with China. Dean Cheng pointed out that Kim Jong-un can say to Beijing, "I have an independent foreign policy. I can meet the United States and South Korea if I want to. What can you do to lift these sanctions?" North Korea can use its new diplomatic position to attempt to gain concessions from Beijing or set a new course through its interactions with South Korea and the United States. Xi, for his part, does not want to be left out of developments surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

What Does the Kim Regime Want?

North Korea will have several diplomatic objectives for 2018 and beyond. They are not mutually exclusive. Even how they are prioritized may be a matter of opportunism rather than a carefully thought-through diplomatic strategy. For the purposes of this paper, they can be grouped into three categories: 1) the status of the Kim regime, 2) the end of "hostile acts" from the United States and South Korea, and 3) settlements. This categorization is conceptual rather than real but provides one framework for thinking about how North Korea approaches diplomacy.

1) Status of the DPRK

This first set of North Korean objectives deals with the Kim regime's interest in regime survival and how it wants to be regarded by the international community. To an extent, the former depends on the latter.

Kim Regime Survival

Though this may be the most obvious of the Kim regime's objectives, it should be born in mind because it is the primary motivation behind the diplomatic outreach. Kim Jong-un's desire is to live to an old age and to have his family secure in their grip on North Korean

leadership for future generations. Now that he reportedly has children, he probably is thinking in longer terms and more dynastically than ever. The obverse is also true, he does not want to be the Kim that lost control of power in North Korea.

If Kim Jong-un has come to believe that the United States is increasingly preparing for war on the peninsula, Kim's diplomacy may be designed to defuse tensions: if he believes that North Korea's nuclear deterrence makes him immune to international pressure, Kim may choose more belligerently provocative tactics, whether conventional military or cyber, to achieve his objectives. This has been referred to as the stability/instability paradox.²⁵ Either way, regime survival will be the motivation behind the tactics that the Kim regime has employed to remain in power. The problem for Kim is that he cannot be sure which path is more likely to ensure regime survival: defiance and demonization towards external powers, or accommodation with them.

Legitimacy

The Kim regime has long sought to be recognized as the legitimate government of North Korea, an objective which has been thwarted by the continuing, inconclusive outcome of the Korean War as both Koreas became United Nations members, while each claimed to be the legitimate authority over the other's territory. American commentators have been dismissive in the past of North Korea's claims to be interested in negotiating a peace treaty to replace the armistice that ended the Korean War. They have considered it a cynical ploy, intended to waste time while North Korea continued its pursuit of a nuclear arsenal, and a transparent move on North Korea's part to put the continued presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula on the negotiating table.

In the longer-term however, it would seem in North Korea's self-interest to remove South Korea's claim to be the sole, sovereign authority over the peninsula. That would probably require abandoning North Korea's mirror claim over the South, but if the goal is perpetuation of Kim dynastic rule over North Korea, removing alternative claimants, such as those in the South Korean constitution, would seem a logical objective.

Recognition as a Nuclear State

Part of North Korea's drive is to be taken seriously by the international community, and to be regarded as a peer of the larger nuclear powers, rather than as what it is in reality—small, isolated, and poor. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's estimate of the North Korean GDP, approximately \$40 billion per year,²⁶ puts the size of its economy on a par with that of Des Moines, Iowa.²⁷ Although North Korea has declared itself to be a nuclear power, as in Kim Jong-un's New Year's address, it has also endeavored to be recognized as such by South Korea, the United States, China, and Russia, but has been rebuffed so far. Evan Medeiros, Asia director at the U.S. National Security Council under Barack Obama, believes this is a key motivation for Kim Jong-un's offer to meet Trump: "This move is vanity over strategy," he said. "It validates and advances Kim's goal of being recognized as a de facto nuclear state. You don't give away a presidential meeting for nothing. What did we get for this? Nothing."²⁸

Michael Green agrees: “It fits North Korean long-term objectives, not U.S. goals. President Trump brags that no previous president was bold enough to meet with a North Korean leader — but this was not for lack of trying by Pyongyang, which almost lured Bill Clinton to visit in 2000 and made several backchannel overtures to George W. Bush. The North’s objective since the 1990s has been to demonstrate that nuclear weapons have forced American presidents to acknowledge the regime’s legitimacy. Clinton almost fell for it in 2000. George Bush never came close. Now an American president has been delivered. Well played, Pyongyang.”²⁹

Despite North Korea’s reported willingness to discuss “denuclearization,” much depends on what is meant by the term. The United States has been clear that denuclearization means the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons arsenal and program. North Korea, for its part, consistently refers to the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,”³⁰ which analysts believe may mean the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Northeast Asia and U.S. disavowal of extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea and perhaps Japan.

The deal North Korea may be seeking would involve a long term—perhaps a *very* long term—commitment to eventual denuclearization but temporary, *de facto*, recognition that it is a nuclear power.

2) An End to “Hostile Acts”

North Korea has long demanded an end to the “hostile attitude” and “hostile acts” of the United States towards North Korea. What it considers acts of hostility may range from specific economic sanctions, to joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises, to criticism of North Korea’s human rights record. Leaving a cessation of “hostility” loosely defined would likely give North Korea the excuse to claim at a future point of its choosing that the U.S. had violated whatever settlement may emerge from negotiations.

Sanctions

Economic sanctions have been placed on North Korea by the UN, the United States, the EU, South Korea, and Japan to press it toward denuclearization, to punish it for illicit activities such as money laundering and cyberattacks, and in reaction to human rights violations.³¹ There is a rich literature regarding sanctions policy towards North Korea. North Korea watchers debate their effectiveness, but it is clear that Pyongyang wants them lifted. North Korea has described the sanctions as ineffective while at the same time railing against their viciousness.

Ro Jonh-hyok, the deputy head of North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly and director of North Korea’s National Reunification Institute, called for an end to the sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang during an Inter-parliamentary Union meeting in Geneva in late March 2018. Ri said at the meeting, “Now is the high time to put an end to the U.S. anachronistic anti-DPRK hostile policy and its futile moves of sanctions and pressure...The United States should properly understand our position and come out in a manner of sincere and serious attitude for positively contributing to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.”³²

U.S.-ROK Military Exercises

The United States and the Republic of Korea have for many years conducted annual joint military exercises under the auspices of the Combined Forces Command and under the supervision of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (to ensure that there are no violations of the Korean Armistice Agreement) recently under the titles Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Foal Eagle, and Key Resolve. The exercises are intended to ensure readiness, to practice interoperability between U.S. and ROK forces, to signal deterrence towards North Korea, and to provide assurance of the continued U.S. commitment to the alliance. North Korea has long condemned the military exercises, calling them “rehearsals for invasion.”³³ In an unsuccessful attempt to coerce suspension of the February 2011 joint exercises—in the wake of the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010—North Korea’s military threatened a “merciless counteraction as engulfing Seoul in sea of flames.” KCNA urged “direct fire at sources of the anti-DPRK psychological warfare to destroy them on the principle of self-defense.”³⁴

The United States and South Korea have shown flexibility towards the exercises in the past, cancelling scheduled Team Spirit exercises between 1994 and 1996 in response to diplomatic thawing with North Korea after the signing of the Agreed Framework. North Korea has never offered to suspend its own annual military exercises and has a history of withdrawing from talks with the excuse that U.S.-ROK exercises had made talks impossible, such as in response to the Team Spirit exercises in 1986 and 1993. Remarkably, it, according to the South Korea government, did not call for a suspension of the planned April 2018 joint exercises as a precondition for the Kim-Moon summit or the Kim-Trump summit. This may have been because of the “Olympic Peace” arrangement which called for a delay in the joint exercises until after the Olympic Games. North Korea may have chosen to honor its commitment to not object to the April joint exercises rather than to be accused of bad faith before new talks had even begun.

Human Rights

North Korea’s abysmal record of human rights violations has drawn international condemnation for decades. Prior to 2014, North Korea took an attitude of ignoring the complaints or lightly dismissing them as lies concocted by anti-North Korean forces. That approach changed after the 2014 publication of the finding of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea.³⁵ Since then, North Korea has attempted to more aggressively defend itself, including by dispatching senior officials to rebut the accusations and accusing its accusers of human rights abuses of their own.³⁶ The change of tactics in dealing with accusations of human rights abuses may have been triggered in part by the thorough, well-documented, convincing, and horrific nature of the UN COI report. It proved more difficult for North Korea to ignore than previous NGO reports and individual defector testimonies. The change may also have been prompted by the advent of social media, which has provided a network for human rights activists and the defector community, mobilizing public opinion more than was previously possible. Because of increased pressure over its human rights record—up to and including the possibility of regime members being put on trial for crimes against humanity as recommended by the COI—Kim Jong-un probably would seek to categorize accusations of human rights abuses as part of the United States’ “hostile attitude,” to which he would seek to negotiate an end.

International Community Coordination

North Korea has criticized international coordination as part of the “racket” against North Korea. Although such cooperation may not qualify overtly as a “hostile act,” North Korea will certainly hope through bilateral diplomacy to drive wedges among the United States, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. The desire of all to not be sidelined in the course of diplomacy during 2018 will give North Korea considerable leverage in bilateral talks. That could be countered by close consultations among them, but that may not be possible because of the levels of mutual suspicion among them, along with domestic pressures to protect their various specific national interests.

There may be advantages to starting with bilateral talks between North and South Korea, and between North Korea and the United States. Bilateral talks may provide for more frankness and more flexibility than would a larger multilateral format such as the Six-Party talks. However, any meaningful and durable settlement will require at least the acquiescence if not the active participation of the six countries. Their ability to support or obstruct an agreement on the peninsula means that they must have an eventual role.

3) Settlements

Although related to status, the idea of settlements is separate. North Korea will seek status and recognition in any negotiation but creating a fundamentally new and stable equilibrium on the Korean Peninsula will eventually require settling long-unresolved issues. They may be deferred in the interest of resolving current tensions, but they will have to be addressed sooner or later.

Peace Treaty

The current armistice leaves legitimacy in question, now perhaps more for North Korea than South Korea. As the overwhelmingly more successful of the two countries, South Korea poses a greater long-term threat to North Korea than the other way around. Its power of attraction is great. If the border between the two grew porous, culturally and economically, North Korea would struggle to have a competitive advantage in anything. That makes it important for North Korea to shore up its legitimacy as a full and equal signatory to an eventual Peace Treaty, the terms of which it would depend upon to defend itself against South Korean superiority.

Security Assurances

North Korea would seek, although it may not expect to achieve, an end to the U.S. military presence on the peninsula. If the armistice could be replaced by a peace treaty, North Korea would argue that there would be no further justification for U.S. forces to be in the area, or for a U.S.-ROK alliance. However, even if a peace treaty were achieved, the U.S.-ROK alliance would likely remain in place. The United States and South Korea maintain that the alliance is about more than defending South Korea from an attack by North Korea. South Korean forces fought in the Vietnam War and in the Iraq War in 2004.

During Trump’s state visit on November 7-8, the White House published a joint press release in which “President Trump and President Moon affirmed that United States-Republic of Korea cooperation on global issues is an indispensable and expanding aspect of our Alliance and decided to advance future-oriented cooperation through high-level consultations in the areas of energy, science and technology, space, environment, and health.

They announced a new Partnership in Energy Security, Health Security, and Women's Economic Empowerment."³⁷

Regardless, the Kim regime will view the continuation of the alliance as threatening to his regime, even after a peace treaty is signed. North Korea will continue at the very least to call for the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea, an end to U.S. naval and air force operations near the peninsula, and perhaps even from Japan. The nature of the "security assurances" that will be sought by North Korea likely will be a significant sticking point.

It would seem symmetrical for China to guarantee North Korea's security as the United States guarantees South Korea's. However, North Korea is suspicious of China's intentions and has not hosted Chinese forces in North Korea since the end of the Korean War. It seems unlikely to be willing to count on China to defend its sovereignty. For North Korea, the question of whether to trust the United States will prove more important than whether it can trust China.

Reunification of the Korean Peninsula

North Korea watchers differ as to whether the "real goal" of Kim Jong-un is simply regime survival or whether he has an ambition to unify the Korean Peninsula on North Korea's terms. On the one hand, it seems improbable that he could believe that North Korea could dominate the advanced, rich, and democratically feisty ROK. As one South Korean told the author, "We rose up against our own President (Park Geun-hye), we certainly wouldn't put up with being ruled by Kim Jong-un!" On the other hand, Kim Jong-un's speech to the Party Congress in Pyongyang in early 2017 was explicit in saying that a socialist unification of the peninsula was the North Korea's goal and destiny. Removal of U.S. forces from South Korea is a step in that direction.

It seems most likely that Kim does not regard regime survival and unification as competing goals—they may be mutually reinforcing. However, because unification by force or coercion does not seem within North Korea's grasp, it may be a goal deferred until an opportunity presents itself.

Kim Jong-un may be willing to put off the issue of unification because Moon Jae-in seems similarly inclined. In his public statements, President Moon speaks of unification as a goal, but a distant one. His vision seems to be one of the two Koreas growing together organically through trade, investment, and people-to-people ties. The process he envisions seems similar to that of European integration, a slow, practical melding until unification is achieved at some barely-perceived point in the process.

North Korean Diplomacy through 2018

Key dates matter to the North Koreans. The year 2018 marks the deeply significant 70th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK on September 9, 1948. Given the auspiciousness of the year, Kim Jong-un will be motivated to make large strides in domestic programs and in international engagement. He may also be opening up diplomacy in order to have a period of stability leading up to the celebrations. With the rapid pace of developments, North Korea may have to struggle to avoid a breakdown of talks in advance of the September 9

anniversary date—especially given the stated suspicions of U.S. officials keen to avoid “the mistakes of past administrations.” It may be under pressure to make concessions as well as to demand them.

Apart from September 9, other dates may influence the course of negotiations this year. One that has passed was Kim Jong-il’s birthday on February 16, which coincided with Lunar New Year and was celebrated in 2018 with “modest celebratory events” and a visit by Kim Jong-un to his father’s mausoleum.³⁸

Apr 15	Birth Date of Kim Il-sung
Apr 25	Chosun People’s Army Foundation Day
Jun 6	Chosun Children’s Union Foundation Day
Jun 19	Great Leader Kim Jong-il Day
Jul 27	Day of Victory in the Fatherland Liberation War
Aug 25	Day of Songun (“Military First” doctrine)
Sep 9	National Day
Oct 10	Korean Workers Party Foundation Day
Dec 24	Birth Date of Kim Jong Suk (anti-Japanese war heroine, Kim Il-sung bodyguard, “great mother of the revolution.”)
Dec 27	Constitution Day

How many summits Kim Jong-un will hold during 2018, first with China, then South Korea the United States, then perhaps, Japan, and Russia—or with some combination of the above—is currently unknown. What we have is North Korea’s intention, at least as relayed by Chinese reports of his meetings in Beijing: “It is our consistent stand to be committed to denuclearization on the peninsula, in accordance with the will of late President Kim Il-sung and late general secretary Kim Jong-Il,” Kim said, referring to his grandfather and father, according to the statement by China’s foreign ministry.”³⁹

Conclusion

Some observers believe that a summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump is merely a North Korean ruse to attempt to ease sanctions on North Korea, and to gain the legitimacy that Kim Jong-un would expect from being able to achieve a meeting with a sitting U.S. president, an objective that both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il failed to achieve. Kim Jong-un and Trump may share a common desire to achieve feats that eluded their predecessors. Others have suggested that Kim Jong-un may now genuinely believe that the United States is prepared to strike North Korea in order to prevent North Korea from being able to gain the ability to attack the U.S. homeland with a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. Observers in this camp look to Trump’s belligerent rhetoric of 2017 and his recent appointment of John Bolton as national security advisor, who has openly advocated for the legitimacy of a first strike on North Korea,⁴⁰ as signs that the U.S. may seriously consider a military option.

Two other possible reasons for the current outbreak of diplomacy may be: 1) that economic sanctions are working—Kim Jong-un may prefer to negotiate before his foreign currency reserves are depleted and while he is not yet in desperate economic straits, a situation he may foresee within months; and 2) after the rapid pace of missile and nuclear testing, North

Korea may need a pause to analyze data and prepare future tests. If they have to pause for engineering reasons, why should they not take advantage of the opportunity to pretend to be interested in diplomacy—to appear to be taking the high road for the time being?

Summitry without deep preparation poses high opportunities and high risks. The risks are threefold: 1) if the inter-Korean summit goes well but the Kim-Trump summit goes badly, it could drive a wedge in the alliance—the U.S. side might appear to be the obstacle to progress being made between the two Koreas; 2) in their haste to achieve a deal quickly, Kim Jong-un and Trump may rush into an unsustainable or destabilizing agreement, for example one that would require the withdrawal of U.S. forces unrealistically soon or that would commit North Korea to an intrusive inspection regime that it would be unable to honor once it understood what was expected of it; and 3) a breakdown of negotiations would increase the chances of war even beyond what they were before the end of 2017 because the diplomatic route would have been tried and failed, perhaps reducing the number of options to one.

However, the United States may have little choice other than to negotiate now that North Korea has extended the invitation. The point of U.S. “maximum pressure” and isolation was to lead North Korea to the negotiating table. If they have agreed to negotiate, is this not what success is supposed to look like?

Endnotes

- ¹ Associated Press, “From DMZ to ship at sea, rumors of Trump-Kim summit site swirl,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/from-dmz-to-ship-at-sea-trump-kim-summit-site-rumors-swirl/2018/03/20/c518bf6e-2ca6-11e8-8dc9-3b51e028b845_story.html?utm_term=.b6cf8924edbf.
- ² Kim Hjelmgaard, “North Korea threatens ‘unimaginable’ strike on United States,” *USA Today*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/19/north-korea-threatens-unimaginable-strike-united-states/779097001/>.
- ³ Carol Morello and Anne Gearan, “North Korea says it won’t give up nuclear weapons and that entire U.S. mainland is within firing range,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-under-no-circumstances-will-give-up-its-nuclear-weapons/2017/08/07/33b8d319-fbb2-4559-8f7d-25e968913712_story.html?utm_term=.42a649372cf9.
- ⁴ For a helpful summary of the pre-2018 history of talks and agreements reached with North Korea, see Robbie Gramer and Emily Tamkin, “Decades of U.S. Diplomacy with North Korea: a Timeline,” *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/a-timeline-of-u-s-negotiations-talks-with-north-korea-trump-kim-jong-un-pyongyang-nuclear-weapons-diplomacy-asia-security/>.
- ⁵ “New Year’s Address,” *North Korea Leadership Watch*, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/2018/01/01/new-years-address/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea to Send Olympic Athletes to South Korea, in Breakthrough," *New York Times*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/world/asia/north-korea-south-olympics-border-talks.html>.

¹⁰ Soyoung Kim and James Pearson, "North Korea heads for diplomacy gold medal at Olympics: analysts," Reuters, February 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-2018-northkorea-diplomacy-an/north-korea-heads-for-diplomacy-gold-medal-at-olympics-analysts-idUSKBN1FV0JV>.

¹¹ Choe Sang-Hun, "North and South Korea Set a Date for Summit Meeting at Border," *New York Times*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/world/asia/north-korea-south-summit-border.html>.

¹² Associated Press, "Rival Koreas begin high-level talks meant to set up summit," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/rival-koreas-begin-high-level-talks-meant-to-set-up-summit/2018/03/28/b0cfe2d2-32f3-11e8-b6bd-0084a1666987_story.html?utm_term=.0fd2a07a4fc7.

¹³ Reuters, Associated Press, Kyodo, "South Korean envoys hold unprecedented meeting with North Korean leader Kim," *Japan Times*, March 5, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/03/05/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/south-korean-delegation-heads-pyongyang/#.Wr6L9i-IUE>.

¹⁴ Joshua Berlinger and Sophie Jeong, "Kim Jong Un wants to 'write new history' on South Korea reunification," *CNN*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/05/asia/north-korea-south-korea-talks-intl/index.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jeremy Diamond and Euan McKirdy, "Trump accepts offer to meet Kim Jong Un," *CNN*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/08/politics/donald-trump-kim-jong-un/index.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Donald Trump, Twitter Post, March 9, 2018, 7:42 PM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/972271520847466498>.

¹⁹ Amanda Macias, "North Korea is quiet while the White House scrambles to coordinate talks between President Trump and Kim Jong Un," *CNBC*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/27/north-korea-silent-amid-talk-of-trump-kim-jong-un-meeting.html>.

²⁰ Ibid.

- ²¹ Bryan Harris, "North Korean silence highlights risk for Kim Jong Un," *Financial Times*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/f6a2914e-2676-11e8-b27e-cc62a39d57a0>.
- ²² "North Korea's Minister for Foreign Affairs Ri Yong-Ho will visit Sweden on 15-16 March," Government Offices of Sweden, March 15, 2018, <http://www.government.se/press-releases/2018/03/north-koreas-minister-for-foreign-affairs-ri-yong-ho-will-visit-sweden-on-1516-march/>.
- ²³ Joshua Berlinger, Euan McKirdy, and Eliza Mackintosh, "North Korean foreign minister arrives in Sweden amid summit speculation," *CNN*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/15/asia/north-korea-sweden-intl/index.html>.
- ²⁴ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2000/.
- ²⁵ Vipin Narang and Ankit Panda, "Nuclear Stability, Conventional Instability: North Korea and the Lessons from Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 20, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/20/nuclear-stability-conventional-instability-north-korea-and-lessons-from-pakistan-pub-74787>.
- ²⁶ World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_kn.html.
- ²⁷ "Forecasted Gross Metropolitan Product (GMP) of the United States in 2018, by metropolitan area (in billion current U.S. dollars)," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183808/gmp-of-the-20-biggest-metro-areas/>.
- ²⁸ Katrina Manson, "Donald Trump agrees to meet Kim Jong Un," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/58afd2f6-2330-11e8-ae48-60d3531b7d11>.
- ²⁹ Michael Green, "Three Serious Problems with a Trump-Kim Meeting," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/three-serious-problems-with-a-trump-kim-meeting/>.
- ³⁰ Evans J.R. Revere, "A U.S.-North Korea Summit: What could possibly go wrong?" Brookings Institution, March 9, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/09/a-u-s-north-korea-summit-what-could-possibly-go-wrong/>.
- ³¹ Eleanor Albert, "What to Know About the Sanctions on North Korea," Council on Foreign Relations, January 3, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-know-about-sanctions-north-korea>.
- ³² Reuters, "North Korea urges the US to adopt a 'serious attitude' for peace and end sanctions," *CNBC*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/26/north-korea-urges-the-us-to-adopt-a-serious-attitude-for-peace-and-end-sanctions.html>.
- ³³ Amanda Macias, "Here come the annual US-South Korean war games that freak out North Korea," *CNBC*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/20/us-south-korea-war-games-that-freak-out-north-korea-coming-soon.html>.

- ³⁴ Jung Sung-ki, "S. Korea, U.S. Start War Games Amid Threat from North Korea," *Defense News*, February 28, 2011, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=5825443&c=ASI&s=LAN>.
- ³⁵ "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," United Nations Human Rights Council, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>.
- ³⁶ "North Korea accuses US of rights violations against its own people in 'white paper,'" *Telegraph*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/31/north-korea-accuses-us-rights-violations-against-people-white/>.
- ³⁷ "Joint Press Release by the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," The White House, November 8, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-press-release-united-states-america-republic-korea/>.
- ³⁸ Joohee Cho, "North Korea celebrates birthday of current leader's father, Kim Jong Il," *ABC News*, February 16, 2018, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/north-korea-celebrates-birthday-current-leaders-father-kim/story?id=53135062>.
- ³⁹ "Date set for first inter-Korean summit since 2007," Aljazeera, March 29, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/date-set-inter-korean-summit-2007-180329055846794.html>.
- ⁴⁰ John Bolton, "The Legal Case for Striking North Korea First," *Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-legal-case-for-striking-north-korea-first-1519862374>.