



TRUMP, TOO, NEEDS TO BE A SMART COOKIE

BY DENNY ROY

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If the Trump administration continues to make serious plans for a summit meeting between the leaders of the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea), it might consider several bits of advice from analysts outside the government. Below I offer mine.

1. Accept that the meeting is a win-win

If Kim gets a meeting with a sitting US president, we can expect that North Korean propaganda will spin it as a humbled American leader acknowledging Kim's greatness. Thus, critics have argued that a summit will bolster the regime. This is true, but it is not sufficient reason to rebuff the offer for a meeting. North Korean propaganda spews outrageously distorted or erroneous regime-bolstering commentary about the US-DPRK relationship all the time, and Americans cannot control it. So Kim will get his small victory, but the United States also wins: Pyongyang has finally met the US precondition for negotiations (putting the nuclear missile project on the table), and has temporarily ceased test missile launches to make the summit possible.

2. Have realistic expectations

Kim's reported offer to bargain away his nukes may prove insincere, or we may quickly discover that the price the North Koreans demand for denuclearization is unreasonable from the US and/or ROK standpoint. One wonders what US policy or force posture changes Kim will require to make him feel safe. No one should be spiking the football yet, nor should the administration be automatically accused of being hoodwinked if pursuing the DPRK overture leads to no lasting progress. This is an opportunity to take a step that might lead to a breakthrough, no more and no less. The Trump administration should avoid putting itself in a position where the fear of failing to meet expectations gives the North Koreans bargaining leverage.

3. Don't pay for the meeting

North Korea typically tries to extract whatever additional incidental benefits it can from meetings with its adversaries. South Korea infamously made a secret payment of \$500 million to North Korea to make possible the Kim Dae-jung – Kim Jong Il summit in 2000.

Pyongyang got the ROK to pay \$2.6 million for the attendance of a handful of North Korean athletes and a vastly larger group of hangers-on at the recently concluded Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games. The DPRK also unsuccessfully demanded that the Seoul government provide fuel for the ferry that brought in North Korean musicians. This is part of a pattern that includes many cases of North Korean diplomats posted overseas engaging in illegal activities to raise cash. The Trump administration should not entertain any suggestion from Pyongyang that the US pay North Korea's costs for participating in the proposed summit.

4. Be aware of Pyongyang's core objectives

Part of the calculation of Kim's brain trust might be that Trump is not personally committed to the US-ROK alliance, based on his frequent remarks as a presidential candidate that he would be willing to walk away from US alliances in Asia if alliance partners did not pay the full cost of hosting US bases and personnel. Perhaps they believe Trump would be amenable to an agreement presented as having a double benefit of removing the DPRK nuclear threat to the United States and relieving the US of the financial burden of defending a strong and wealthy ally. President Trump should understand that a vital, perennial objective of the DPRK regime is to get US forces out of South Korea and break the US commitment to defend the ROK. His advisers should make sure the president clearly understands how a US military presence in South Korea fits into the long-term US grand strategy, taking into account not only the protection of South Korea from a possible DPRK attack, but also the security of Japan and the need to balance against growing Chinese power and influence.

5. Don't make human rights a big deal

The United States should approach the possibility of an agreement with North Korea in a way similar to détente with the Soviet Union, the opening of normal relations with the People's Republic of China, or the nuclear deal with Iran. The fact that we cannot solve all problems in the bilateral relationship at once should not prevent us from trying to solve one major problem first. Although the human rights situation in the DPRK is abysmal, demanding that the Kim regime close the gulags would be a deal-breaker. Suppression of dissent is a matter of regime security for Kim, and regime security is as important to him as denuclearization is to

Washington. Trump should insist that Kim release the three detained US citizens as part of the summit. Political liberalization, however, must await a change of regime in northern Korea. In the meantime, any chance of voluntary DPRK denuclearization is premised on Washington avoiding what the DPRK government would see as attempts to undermine its legitimacy. The basic deal Kim reportedly offered is denuclearization in exchange for regime security. Although demoralizing for human rights activists, that deal would be a great improvement over the status quo for a United States that has no intrinsic interest in invading North Korea anyway.

6. Be prepared to grasp a Nixon moment

The North Koreans are not fond of the Chinese and under the right circumstances would welcome an opportunity to escape their excessive reliance on China. US negotiators should understand talks with the DPRK not only in the context of denuclearization, but also in the broader context of regional geopolitics. The Americans should be alert to and prepared to follow-up on suggestions that the North Koreans might be amenable to a transformation of the US-DPRK relationship within parameters acceptable to Washington (i.e., verifiable denuclearization and keeping US forces in South Korea). If this path is open, the US leadership should not dismiss it out of hand under pressure from critics who emphasize the regime's criminality. The national interest sometimes requires doing business with unsavory regimes – a situation with which the United States is all too familiar.

7. Rely on sequencing, not trust

Pyongyang has a record of breaking or cheating on agreements, so it's easy to make the argument the DPRK cannot be trusted. That is true, but largely irrelevant. The absence of trust is not a good reason to forego the opportunity for a breakthrough in bilateral relations. Any US-DPRK agreement should not and need not be based on trust, but rather on measurable and observable actions and material conditions. Both sides have demands. Getting the North Koreans to accept procedures to verify their denuclearization, for example, would be a huge problem if negotiations get that far. Pyongyang will want sanctions lifted as soon as possible. Such demands can only be met in a gradual, step-by-step process. Neither side should expect the other to make major concessions without simultaneous reciprocation. The White House has reaffirmed that the United States will not reduce sanctions on North Korea to make possible a Kim-Trump summit. That is wise, and in keeping with the principle of not paying North Korea for the meeting. Kim also reportedly said he expects annual US-ROK military exercises to take place as usual and wouldn't make this a reason to cancel a planned summit.

The proposed summit offers opportunities as well as risks. The risks can be minimized if the Trump team does as much homework as we can presume the North Koreans will. In that case, little if anything will be lost by

pursuing the North Korean overture, which at minimum has bought us a few more weeks of non-testing while sanctions continue to press the regime.

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