

China's Role in the Upcoming Trump-Kim Show

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Earlier this month, North Korean spy chief Kim Yong-chol visited Washington to confirm the second summit between Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump, likely next month. Kim has held three meetings with South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, and another one, in Seoul, is expected soon. China's President Xi Jinping is in the lead—for now, anyway—with four meetings with Kim. Vladimir Putin and Shinzo Abe are waiting for their first.

These numbers matter. Beijing's advantage likely is by North Korean design. Kim took over in the aftermath of his father's death in December 2011, but for six years Xi kept the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's new leader at arm's length. There were no meetings, no invitations, even to the well-attended 2015 anniversary commemoration of the end of World War II. In contrast, South Korean President Park Geun-hye enjoyed a place of honor alongside Xi.

The relationship between the DPRK and the People's Republic of China has long been difficult at best. Since 1950, when Beijing's intervention saved Kim Il-sung from annihilation by American-led forces in the Korean War, China has commonly referred to their connection as "lips-to-teeth" (implying that the two regimes are extraordinarily close). However, Kim showed no gratitude for the intervention, claiming victory for himself and eliminating the PRC's allies within the North Korean leadership. He also began the country's nuclear program, which would protect his nation's independence from its "friends" as well as enemies.

Although Kim's son and successor, Kim Jong-il, visited China often, he ostentatiously refused to take its advice on economic reform. He also continued to pursue nuclear weapons, despite China's desire for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. His son and successor, Kim Jong-un, accelerated nuclear and missile testing. Two years into the younger Kim's reign, he executed his uncle, who was the regime's chief interlocutor with Beijing and was accused of putting the interests of another, unnamed nation before that of his own. When I visited the North in mid-2017, I was told of the Kim government's determination to be economically independent of "any nation." There was no doubt who they meant.

China long returned the barely suppressed hostility. But the government wants neither collapse nor South Korea-dominated reunification, which would leave U.S. troops along the Yalu. Rather, Beijing desires a more pliant and responsible ally.

Because of the two nations' ideological connection, bilateral relations are handled through the Chinese Communist Party's international department, though that link was strained by the CCP's departure from its revolutionary beginnings. The People's Liberation Army also supports the

relationship, though less firmly than in the past, both for reasons of historical experience and current security.

However, there is growing public hostility toward the North in China, as evidenced by increased criticism on China's social media platforms. Chinese academics, too, have turned sharply critical. North Korea is a difficult partner even in economic matters, often treating Chinese companies badly. Worse, its nuclear and missile programs discomfited China. Kim Jong-un dramatically accelerated weapons testing, increasing U.S. demands for tougher sanctions and even threats of war. In response, the Xi government agreed to steadily tougher economic penalties and kept the DPRK in a diplomatic deep freeze.

Although the two governments acted as if the first Kim-Xi summit after six years was a normal, ongoing aspect of their relationship, Beijing almost certainly made the first move. The meeting was an enormous victory for the North Korean leader. The PRC never explained its motivation, but likely feared being left out of a possible geopolitical reordering in Northeast Asia.

For North as well as South Korea, the U.S. is an attractive partner, particularly because of its distance. Famously termed a "shrimp among whales," Korea long suffered from the too-close attention of China, Japan, and Russia. America is much further away, a powerful nation which can help smaller states balance against their more immediate, powerful rivals while being less likely to dominate from afar. The prospect of Pyongyang making a deal with Washington, perhaps even accepting a continued U.S. military presence, was discomfiting to Beijing.

Three more Kim-Xi summits followed. Equally significant, there is evidence that the PRC loosened sanctions. Cross-border traffic is up, the number of Chinese tourists has surged, and outside observers suspect China of providing its southern neighbor with subsidized rice. International sanctions still bite, but the Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" appears to be kaput.

Xi's attention bolstered the North's bargaining position with the U.S. Nothing is known, publicly, at least, about the substance of the Kim-Xi talks. However, the latest summit's timing suggests consultation in advance of the next Kim meeting with Trump. A North Korean diplomat with whom I recently spoke stated that "China agreed and expressed its understanding" with Pyongyang's position that denuclearization can only follow an improvement in bilateral DPRK-U.S. relations and establishment of formal peace, most likely marked by a formal peace treaty, on the Korean peninsula. Beijing believed that the "DPRK's views should be taken into consideration" in pursuing disarmament, he explained.

Washington would do well to follow suit and chat with Beijing in advance of the February Kim-Trump summit. The U.S. should encourage continued bilateral cooperation and seek support for a specific denuclearization plan. For instance, Washington could announce it was ending the ban on travel to and from the DPRK, offer to begin discussions on establishment of diplomatic relations, agree to replace the armistice with a peace treaty, and pledge the end of joint military exercises on the peninsula. In return, the U.S. would expect formal agreement to ban any missile and nuclear tests, along with further steps along the denuclearization path.

The Trump administration also should give Beijing a commitment not to turn a reunited Korea, should that eventually result, into a military base against the PRC. To the contrary, disarmament would create the best opportunity for the withdrawal of American troops who have been

stationed in South Korea for 66 years. Xi should understand that working with the U.S. on North Korea would not be working against Beijing's interests elsewhere.

Kim Jong-un's decision to engage Washington appears to have freed his inner-diplomat. He is no liberal; there has been no relaxation of his government's controls over the North Korean people. But the rush of summits suggests that he might be prepared to make his country into a more responsible and respectable member of the international community. That would benefit the U.S. and all his neighbors, including China.

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