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Trump bump

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By John Burton North Korea is often described as being unpredictable, but much the same can be said about Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump when he is talking about North Korea.

Earlier this year Trump suggested that perhaps a mobstyle hit could be arranged to take out Kim Jongun, the North Korean leader. But months later he was suggesting that he would be willing to meet Kim over hamburgers in Washington to find a solution to dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear threat.

Neither an ordered assassination nor a hamburger summit is likely to happen. But some of Trump's other ideas regarding the Korean peninsula could see the light of day if he is elected president.

Trump made headlines earlier this year in interviews suggesting that he would pull U.S. troops out of South Korea and Japan if these countries were unwilling to pay their "full" share of costs for enjoying American military protection. He added that South Korea and Japan could strengthen their own defense by acquiring nuclear weapons in the absence of a U.S. military presence.

Such musings were welcomed in Pyongyang. A commentary allegedly written by a China-based Korean academic and published in North Korea's DPRK Today praised Trump for being a "wise politician" and "farsighted presidential candidate." Although the column did not amount to official endorsement of Trump by Pyongyang, the fact that it was allowed to appear in the state-run media surely reflects the thinking of the Kim regime.

Trump is not the first to make suggestions about withdrawing U.S. troops from South Korea. It was also a campaign promise made by Jimmy Carter during his presidential campaign in 1976, when he criticized the autocratic rule of Park Chunghee. But once he was elected to the White House, Carter was persuaded by his senior foreign policy advisors to drop the idea. The withdrawal of U.S. troops has also been mooted for years by groups of both leftwing and libertarian scholars in the U.S. For example, Doug Bandow with the Cato Institute, the Washington-based libertarian think tank, has argued for years, most notably in his 1996 book "Tripwire," that the deployment of U.S. troops in South Korea reflected outmoded strategic thinking and contributed to regional tensions. He said that South Korea and Japan, both advanced economies, could now defend themselves without U.S. assistance.

Such views, however, horrify the foreign policy establishment in Washington as well as officials in Seoul. They have described Trump's proposals concerning South Korea and Japan as naïve and dangerous, particularly when North Korea is ramping up its nuclear ambitions.

Tellingly, the Republican Party platform that was adopted last week during the convention that nominated Trump also appears to disagree with him. It described North Korea as the "Kim family's slave state." The party pledged to "counter any threats from the North Korean regime" and demanded that Pyongyang dismantle its nuclear weapons program.

It is anyone's guess what Trump would actually do if he reaches the White House. "He is a completely transactional figure and opportunistic," Marcus Noland, a North Korean expert and executive vice president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, recently told me.

Scott Snyder, senior fellow for Korean studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, believes that Trump's foreign policy advisors as well as institutional players might try to dissuade him from reducing the U.S. military presence in East Asia, but adds that "the question is whether he would accept it."

The great fear among regional experts is that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and Japan would create a power vacuum that would quickly be filled by Seoul and Tokyo arming themselves with nuclear weapons. Japan would do so because it fears the rising power of China, while South Korea would respond to Japan's rearmament with its own nuclear force.

There is also speculation that South Korea, shorn of the U.S. defense alliance, would team up with China to counter what both countries perceive as a "militaristic" Japan. This would completely alter the balance of power in Northeast Asia. It would also create the ironic situation of both North and South Korea suddenly being on the same side of the geostrategic divide, which would undoubtedly please China.

Of course, this train of troubling events depends on whether Trump reaches the White House. I frankly scoffed when Noland told me last month he gave Trump a 45 percent of being the next U.S. president. I thought the odds were too high.

But when I last checked FiveThirtyEight, the political website of Nate Silver who accurately predicted the outcome of the 2012 U.S. presidential election, he gave Trump a 46 percent chance of winning the election.

Fasten your seatbelts. We could be in for a bumping ride.