



To Make the Summit a Success, Don't Mention Toxic Libya Model

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President Donald Trump shocked the foreign policy establishment when he accepted North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's summit invitation earlier this year. When he cancelled it, many observers feared a return to last fall's warlike confrontation. Now the meeting is back on.

But the president stepped back from his official policy of "maximum pressure." It always seemed unlikely that North Korea's Supreme Leader would abandon weapons developed at such great cost, and do so before receiving any meaningful reward.

Despite the criticism of many Korea specialists, enough has occurred to justify a Trump-Kim meet-up. The DPRK destroyed its underground nuclear test site, released three American prisoners, held a positive summit with President Moon, and hosted CIA Director/Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Pyongyang.

Moreover, the North Koreans do not want a summit disaster. It will be relatively simple for them to affirm the general objective of denuclearization, specify a few deliverables, and detail a follow-up diplomatic process to discuss elimination of the North's nuclear arsenal.

How far and fast the two governments then would go would be anyone's guess. Still, such a result would be worth the effort, simultaneously dampening tensions, constraining the North's threatening behavior, and, most important, creating an opportunity for further, phased reforms.

However, the president should not mention Libya.

National Security Adviser John Bolton publicly mused that the model for denuclearization should be Libya in 2003, essentially boxing up the North's weapons and facilities and sending them to America. It was a dubious example since North Korea's arsenal was far more complex, including completed nukes as well as a substantial inventory of missiles and chemical and biological weapons. Kim's regime also enjoys a deterrent based on its ability to hit Seoul with massed artillery and Scud missiles.

The more important difficulty with the "Libya model," however, is that history did not end with Muammar Khadafy's relinquishment of his most important weapons. President George W. Bush announced that Libya's "good faith will be returned."

For eight years the U.S. and Europe showered him with flowers and whispered sweet nothings in his ear. But then a popular revolt broke out and the West used the excuse of humanitarian intervention to launch a campaign for regime change on the cheap. The onetime Libyan strongman died a particularly public and gruesome death.

Pyongyang was watching: “Libya’s nuclear dismantlement much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as ‘guarantee of security’ and ‘improvement of relations’ to disarm and then swallowed it up by force.” William Tobey, a member of the Bush administration’s Energy Department, put it more simply: “They were bulldozed.”

DPRK drew the obvious conclusions. Last year Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence, explained that for Kim the lesson is “If you had nukes, never give them up. If you don’t have them, get them.”

The Libya model lingers in North Korean minds. I am not the only person who, when visiting Pyongyang, was informed that Libya’s experience illustrated why nuclear weapons are necessary. Officials talked about eliminating America’s “hostile policy,” “military threats,” and “nuclear threats.” But the case of Libya meant that something more than verbal assurances and paper guarantees was necessary to convince the North to give up its weapons.

Unfortunately, President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence compounded the Libya error. Although the president apparently sought to downplay Bolton’s comments, he ended up threatening regime change and war. The vice president followed with much of the same, announcing that the North could “end up like the Libya model ended if Kim Jong-un doesn’t make a deal.”

The American officials’ comments represented precisely the sort of threats that Pyongyang’s nuclear force was intended to rebuff. Moreover, the administration insisted that Pyongyang quickly disarm, before any benefits would be dispensed but after the latter’s leverage had disappeared. What would stop the U.S. from demanding more concessions after the North abandoned its weapons?

Thankfully President Trump reversed course again in his determination to shake up the status quo on the Korean peninsula. Hopefully he will make the most of his opportunity to transform the region.

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