

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly about the Korean Summits

Doug Bandow

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North Korea's Kim Jong-un is different from his father. But will the result of Kim's summits be different from those of his father? So far no one has lost money betting against reconciliation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Kim stepped dramatically onto the world stage when he met South Korean president Moon Jae-in. Next up, or at least planned, is Kim's summit with President Donald Trump, at a location and time yet to be decided. Kim previously traveled to Beijing to chat with President Xi Jinping. There is talk that he also might meet with Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Kim has become a jet-setter by North Korean standards.

What to make of the new Kim? There's the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The good was Kim's performance as a seemingly normal statesman. Like his father (remember Team America?) and grandfather, Kim was easy to caricature. But this time Kim appeared as someone with whom the West could do business. Of course, given his human-rights record, we would prefer not to do so. However, Kim, like Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, cannot be wished away.

Moreover, a ruler who leavens his quest for control with a mix of cynicism and pragmatism might sometimes do right, even if for the wrong reason. Kim appears to understand the benefits of engagement with the world. Indeed, he agreed with Moon on all the right objectives: Denuclearizing the peninsula, ending hostility, engaging in peace negotiations, and doing much more.

Obviously, such verbiage, without action, is of little value. However, agreeing with a long list of the West's goals is a start. Further, Kim sounded dramatically different from his predecessors when he asked: "If we maintain frequent meetings and build trust with the United States and

receive promise for an end to the war and a non-aggression treaty, then why would we need to live in difficulty by keeping our nuclear weapons?"

Still, the bad also is real. The Kim–Moon summit was essentially a repeat. Kim’s father, Kim Jong-il, met regularly with China’s rulers, saw Putin in Moscow, and held summits with two South Korean presidents. Kim père also met with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The inter-Korean lovefests generated professions of affection and cooperation — as well as hand-holding and even singing. Out of these meetings grew the “Sunshine Policy,” highlighted by aid, investment, and high hopes.

Which all ended up for naught. Confrontation and brinkmanship replaced disarmament and reform. Nuclear and missile testing accelerated. Over the past year, people even talked seriously of the potential for nuclear war. The latest summit had a more modern feel, but one session is not enough.

In fact, that is Kim’s message with his call for “frequent meetings” and building “trust with the United States.” These objectives require time. Time before the DPRK would give up its nukes.

Moreover, so far nothing has changed in North Korea. Remember that although Mikhail Gorbachev received support in his bid to be general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party as someone possessing “iron teeth,” in the words of foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, Gorbachev soon proved to have a human soul. Dramatic *internal* change, relaxing Moscow’s inhumane rule over its own people, was the most important signal that something really had changed in the U.S.S.R.

Kim has yet to do the same. He was ruthless — and effective — in securing his own power. By one estimate, he has ordered the execution of some 340 people. His government also appears to have arranged the assassination of his half-brother, with whom the Chinese might have hoped to replace Kim.

The Kim-dynasty cult remains in full effect. Kim’s government cracked down on traffic across the Yalu River with China. About the only softening in the North in recent years is the reported rise in bribery, which sometimes spares offenders from further punishment. So far there is no sign of a North Korean variant of glasnost and perestroika.

Yet any serious opening to the West would greatly weaken existing controls. Expanded influences from South Korea would be especially threatening. Even now, the regime is particularly sensitive to the impact of South Korean entertainment, easily spread via flash drives. As a shrimp among whales, as Korea is commonly called, the North could find its “social system,” in DPRK-speak, under siege.

And then there is the ugly. Forget the flowery rhetoric and promises. It really isn’t in Pyongyang’s interest to yield its nukes. And that is partly Washington’s fault.

The U.S. has inadvertently created a powerful incentive for any small Third World state on Washington’s naughty list to develop nuclear weapons. Every U.S. president since Ronald Reagan has initiated at least one regime change. George W. Bush did two. Barack Obama tried

in Syria and succeeded in Libya, which had negotiated away its missiles and nuclear weapons — an example North Korean officials routinely cite.

Now Donald Trump wants to toss aside the nuclear agreement negotiated by his predecessor and make additional demands after Iran complied with the accord. Then there's the addition to the administration of John Bolton and Michael Pompeo, both of whom suggested regime change for North Korea. Bolton urged military action against Iran as well, along with Libya's Moammar Qaddafi in 2011. Recently he suggested using Libya as a template for the DPRK; however, Kim surely knows that this approach did not turn out well for the man who originally made the deal with the U.S.

Whatever the specific justification for Washington's interventions, they greatly increased the value of nuclear weapons as a deterrent for other states. Which means Pyongyang will need to receive something serious in return. But what is Washington prepared to give?

Verbal assurances and paper guarantees aren't likely enough, unless Kim has concluded that he can charm the president and win the latter's friendship. But even that would offer no guarantees for the future. Unless Kim is an utter naïf, innocent about the ways of the world, which seems belied by the nature of his rule, he will want more, perhaps much more.

However, Bolton doesn't even want to provide economic benefits. Let Kim seek reunification with the South, he suggested, which is hardly likely to encourage a deal. Although Defense Secretary Jim Mattis indicated that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea might be on the table, most officials reject the idea, turning the commitment from means to end, and one apparently more important than denuclearization. China could guarantee any agreement, but it is unlikely to consider a military confrontation with America on the North's behalf. Anyway, Ukraine found out the value of third-party defense promises after giving up nuclear weapons when assaulted by Russia: not much.

It is possible that Kim believes that Trump will attack if there is no agreement, but will leave him alone if he complies with Washington's demands. However, the U.S. has carried out regime changes for many reasons. There also are diktats and attacks short of regime change, such as the recent strikes on Syria. Had not Russia stood by the Damascus regime, the attack might have been much heavier.

If President Trump fails to cow Kim into submission, then what? Since immediate denuclearization is unlikely, both parties must consider alternatives. There are intermediate solutions that would increase the security of all involved, even if the DPRK retained a nuclear capability.

Kim's willingness to break the North Korean mold is a positive. Better to jaw-jaw than war-war, said Winston Churchill. However, the Kim-Moon meeting is merely the first step in a long journey. We've been here before. This time let's hope we end up in a better place.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of *The Politics of Plunder: Misgovernment in**

Washington and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and a co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.