

THE ORANGE COUNTY
REGISTER

Not quite back to the drawing board with North Korea

Eric Gomez

May 24, 2018

Donald Trump withdrew from his upcoming summit with Kim Jong Un scheduled for June 12th, citing “the tremendous anger and open hostility” that North Korea displayed in recent days as the reason for his decision. The end of the summit creates a host of questions and uncertainties about what happens next for Northeast Asia.. There is ample reason to be pessimistic, but thankfully a war between the United States and North Korea is not a foregone conclusion.

Trump and Kim clearly had wildly different expectations about both the reasons for and the outcomes of the summit. Senior Trump administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, publicly claimed that “maximum pressure,” had forced Kim to the negotiating table and called for North Korea to take significant steps towards denuclearization before receiving any sanctions relief. Kim’s rhetoric about the summit was very different. Instead of being forced to the table, Kim felt confident in his nuclear deterrent and probably viewed the summit as a way to improve the U.S.-North Korea relationship. North Korean statements did not take denuclearization off the table, but rather treated it as a long-term outcome that depended on normalization of relations with the United States.

Given this vast gulf in expectations there was a good chance that the summit would have spectacularly failed if it took place as scheduled. Delaying the summit in order to work out differences and keep expectations manageable would have been a better decision than withdrawing from the summit entirely, but withdrawal is still better than a failure of high-level diplomacy.

While Trump’s decision to cancel the summit doesn’t represent the worst possible outcome, the current situation has much more cloud than silver lining. The relative stability of the past few months could quickly unravel, and whether or not it does will largely depend on how other actors, especially China and South Korea, react to Trump’s move.

One of the Trump administration’s major foreign policy accomplishments in its first year was the broad international support it was able to get for tightening sanctions against North Korea. Getting China’s support for UN Security Council sanctions was especially important given Pyongyang’s economic dependence on Beijing.

Trump’s decision to pull out of the summit with Kim risks turning the United States from a marshal of international sanctions to an “odd man out.” China is unlikely to support new U.S. efforts to pressure North Korea given Beijing’s own diplomacy push and growing tension with

the United States over trade issues and Chinese military deployments in the South China Sea. Beijing has long viewed sanctions on North Korea as a means to diplomacy. If the North Korea-China relationship continues to improve then there won't be much appetite for China to support future U.S. efforts to pressure North Korea.

South Korea's reaction to Trump's cancellation of the summit is less predictable than China's. On the one hand, the series of events that culminated in Trump's withdrawal started when the North cancelled high-level talks with South Korean officials last week. Seoul also depends on a military alliance with the United States for protection against North Korea. On the other hand, South Korean president Moon Jae-in firmly believes in diplomacy and engagement with North Korea, enjoys very high popularity, and already has an agreement with the North to improve inter-Korean relations. Moon likely wants to keep inter-Korean diplomacy alive, which will complicate a return to supporting a U.S. "maximum pressure" strategy.

North Korean behavior in the wake of Trump's decision to pull out of the summit will probably be the decisive factor for South Korea. If Pyongyang halts diplomatic engagement with Seoul and resumes testing ballistic missiles it will be much harder for Moon to justify further engagement with North Korea. However, if North Korea can demonstrate restraint there is a good chance that Moon will continue with engagement. This outcome would deepen current tensions in the U.S.-South Korea alliance but would be a net positive for regional peace and stability.

No Trump-Kim summit is better than a failed one, but Trump's decision to pull out of the summit still carries more risks than benefits. If Kim can keep a cool head and maintain diplomacy with China and South Korea, he would make a U.S. return to "maximum pressure" very difficult and deepen a growing wedge between Washington and Seoul. If Trump puts Bolton in the driver's seat after this failure of diplomacy, the risk of outright conflict with North Korea will increase.

Eric Gomez is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute.