

Roll Call

Analysis: Trump Follows His Gut on Tariffs and Kim Summit

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March 10, 2018

With his go-it-alone approach to tariffs and possible conventional wisdom-busting meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, President Donald Trump is showing how he follows his instincts above the advice of allies and experts.

But there's no consensus on whether his gut-level approach to foreign policy will produce the desired results. That means the world will have to stay tuned — and by all accounts that's just how he wants it.

One aspect of this presidency that sets it aside from its modern-day predecessors is the spur-of-the-moment aspect of Trump's decision-making that aligns with his television producer mindset and experiences as a transaction-by-transaction businessman.

The television mindset was on display Thursday when he tweeted and then commented to reporters to promote an afternoon “meeting” where he signed proclamations setting in motion his steel and aluminum tariffs.

Later, reporters noticed the president, for the first time during working hours, lingering around the White House briefing room, where he teased the forthcoming announcement about North Korea.

When Chung Eui-yong, South Korea's national security adviser, informed him of Kim's invitation to talk, Trump quickly accepted. Several top officials and aides were present, but the president reportedly made the call on his own.

“They were all in the room,” a White House official said Friday of Trump's national security adviser, Defense secretary, deputy secretary of State, national intelligence director and deputy CIA director. “They weighed in.”

The decision would make him the first U.S. president to ever meet with a North Korean leader and it stunned White House aides, lawmakers and foreign policy experts.

It will require Trump to work closely with South Korea, Japan, China and others on a deal.

But it came just hours after the president slapped tariffs on each of them, creating ill will with the leaders he will need to secure what would be a world-shaping deal.

“There is no clear ‘Trump doctrine’ that has emerged yet,” said Lisa Collins of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “His [approach] is different depending on the issue and, it really seems, the president’s feelings at any given time.”

Chances of success

So can Trump’s go-with-his-gut approach and penchant for drama work?

Daniel Davis, a retired Army officer and former adviser to the South Korean military, acknowledged Friday he has been “a critic of President Trump over the last year on some things he did on foreign policy.”

“But I do think what he is doing with North Korea and Kim Jong Un right now deserves a chance,” Davis said. “A lot of people are saying Kim gains legitimacy or that he is going to play Trump, but nothing fundamentally changes. ... The United States has given up not one bit of leverage by agreeing to sit down and talk.

“And I think Kim assumes a substantial amount of risk here,” he added. “If he comes in with bunch of unreasonable demands or negotiates in bad faith, he risks making Trump mad — which could lead to [U.S.] military action or much harsher sanctions.”

But a long list of lawmakers and longtime foreign policy hands warn that the president’s approach and unmoored views could complicate his goals.

Several former officials told Roll Call they saw few signs Trump and his team are considering things like what he might offer Kim in return for the North Korean leader giving up nuclear arms.

That’s what Victor Cha, who once was on track to be Trump’s ambassador to South Korea, was thinking of shortly after the summit was announced.

“The question becomes what are we putting on table: sanctions? Normalization? Peace treaty?” he tweeted.

The White House official said they are considering “a range of policy options that are available should [North Korean officials] offer a verifiable plan to de-nuke.”

Eric Gomez, an analyst at the libertarian CATO Institute, called the Trump-Kim summit “a good thing” because “diplomacy has been sorely lacking from the Trump administration’s approach up to now.”

“However, there are also reasons for concern. Trump doesn’t have a very deep bench of diplomats,” Gomez said. “This will be a difficult task on such short notice.”

White House officials said the president and his aides were grappling with expectations and goals for the meeting. No decisions have been made about what the president might do, for instance, if the summit goes poorly.

As always, what happens next could depend on how the president feels in the hours and days after. And there’s always the chance the summit won’t even happen. And on that, White House has already given itself some wiggle room.