



## **The U.S.-North Korea summit: Some daunting obstacles**

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The on-again, off-again summit meeting between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un is on again. However, crucial conditions must be met for the event to become anything other than a brief photo opportunity that later descends into an exchange of vitriol. Various experts have argued that Kim must commit to his country's complete denuclearization for the summit to succeed. That may well be true, and it is highly uncertain whether he is willing to take such a drastic step. Even if he does, there also must be important changes in U.S. policy. Two shifts are imperative.

One is that Washington must abandon its fixation on the "Libya model" as the outcome it seeks. Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and National Security Advisor John Bolton have all invoked that model in recent weeks. Their citation of the Libya agreement has led critics to wonder whether those outspoken hawks are trying to sabotage the negotiations. One could scarcely come up with an argument less likely to induce Kim to compromise than highlighting the Libya precedent.

An accord was reached between Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi and the Western powers in 2003 following the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The Libyan leader appeared to be trying to avoid Saddam Hussein's fate. Qaddafi agreed to abandon Libya's embryonic nuclear program and revive Tripoli's adherence to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In exchange, the Western powers agreed to lift the economic sanctions they had imposed on Libya, normalize their relations with Tripoli, and welcome Qaddafi's government back into international forums and institutions.

There are two problems with an attempt to apply the Libya model to North Korea. First, there is a massive difference between the Libyan and North Korean nuclear programs. Tripoli's effort was in its infancy, so agreeing to abandon it was not a huge concession. Pyongyang's program is far advanced. Indeed, most experts believe that the country has enough nuclear material to build more than a dozen weapons, and the regime very likely has built and deployed nearly that number already. North Korea has conducted several underground nuclear tests as well as multiple tests of ballistic missile delivery systems. In other words, Washington is asking Kim to

give up an existing, albeit still modest, nuclear arsenal. That is a much greater concession than Qaddafi was expected to make.

But there is a second, even more important, reason why the Libya model is sheer poison to North Korea. Kim and his colleagues remember all-too-well what happened to Qaddafi after he relinquished his nuclear program. When another in a long series of revolts erupted against his rule in early 2011, the United States and its NATO allies double crossed the Libyan leader and backed the rebels. In other words, they launched a regime-change war. U.S./ NATO air and cruise missile strikes were crucial factors in the insurgents' successful revolution. Not only did they overthrow Qaddafi, they tortured and executed him in a most gruesome manner.

U.S. officials are being utterly obtuse if they think North Korean leaders do not recall what happened to the Libyan strongman once he gave up his country's nuclear program. Members of North Korea's political elite recall that outcome with great clarity, including Washington's duplicity. Kim and his associates are not likely to put their necks in a similar noose. Following Qaddafi's demise, they specifically cited the episode as a key reason why their country needed to build and retain a nuclear deterrent. If the summit meeting is to succeed, the Trump administration must abandon all references to the Libya model and all hope of achieving a similar agreement.

Another change that must occur in Washington's approach is a greater willingness to make concessions that meet North Korea's principal policy objectives. Those demands are long-standing and straightforward. Pyongyang wants a full, formal treaty ending the Korean War. The 1953 armistice suspended combat operations, but it did not resolve the underlying diplomatic and political questions. Both the United States and China would have to add their signatures to the agreement that Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-In signed in April, or more likely, all four parties to the conflict would need to sign a broader treaty to achieve that goal.

Pyongyang wants Washington to extend diplomatic recognition to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and lift the economic sanctions that Washington and its allies have imposed over the decades. Those two issues are certain to be at the forefront of any summit meeting that takes place between Kim and President Trump. Other issues include Pyongyang's demand for an end to the annual military exercises between U.S. and South Korean forces, the withdrawal of U.S. "nuclear and strategic assets" from South Korea, and, at some point, the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the Peninsula.

Washington's key demand will be for North Korea's full denuclearization, including the shipment of all existing warheads out of the country and a system of inspections to ensure Pyongyang's continuing compliance with a nonnuclear status. President Trump must decide if the United States is willing to make all, or at least most, of those concessions in exchange for North Korea's ironclad agreement to relinquish its existing nuclear weapons and forego any future nuclear ambitions. Unless U.S. leaders are prepared to take that step, hopes for lasting peace on the Peninsula will be stillborn.

In addition to meeting such North Korean demands, the Trump administration must be willing to offer the DPRK a nonaggression pact or security guarantee. That means a written agreement

reassuring Kim that the United States is now out of the forcible regime-change business. There is a potential complication, though. Washington may well press Beijing to provide a guarantee that North Korea will remain nonnuclear, if the United States meets Pyongyang's demands. It is not certain whether Beijing would be willing to offer a guarantee of good behavior on the part of its longtime, but volatile, ally.

Moreover, North Korea may well want China to add its signature to any security guarantee that the United States offers. Just as American leaders are likely to be wary of a paper promise of denuclearization from Pyongyang, Kim is not likely to place extensive trust in a promise from Washington that the United States will not pursue forcible regime change at some point.

Taken together, these factors suggest that even if President Trump is willing to embrace maximum diplomatic flexibility, the odds still are against a comprehensive agreement emerging from the summit. At best, the meeting is likely to produce only a few, initial steps toward such an objective. And even that achievement will require U.S. leaders to abandon their fixation on the Libya model and make concessions that they have declined even to consider until now. If those obstacles can be overcome, however, there is at least a glimmer of hope for progress toward lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

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