



Does China Win or Lose from the U.S.-North Korea Thaw?

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The Singapore summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un has generated a considerable amount of controversy. Most analysts in the United States and East Asia seem relieved that the meeting continued the recent reduction in bilateral tensions and offers at least some hope that the nuclear crisis can be brought to a peaceful conclusion. However, a vocal minority, especially in the United States and Japan, takes a different view, insisting that the wily North Korean leader outwitted and out-bargained the U.S. president. The debate in the United States largely breaks along partisan lines, with most Republicans praising Trump's performance and most Democrats sharply criticizing it.

Another issue that has sparked controversy (although far less attention) in both the United States and East Asia is whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) is pleased or displeased about the results of the summit and the overall U.S.-North Korean rapprochement. One faction argues that the outcome gratified Beijing and that China was indeed a key architect of the meeting. According to that thesis, the PRC is a significant winner in the new, less confrontational environment between Washington and Pyongyang. Writing in Bloomberg News, veteran foreign affairs correspondent Nick Wadhams even insists that China "got everything it wanted" from the Singapore summit. "Other than Kim Jong-un," he states, the biggest winner is "unquestionably the government of President Xi Jinping, which had been advocating the very process that Trump has now embarked upon."

Washington Post columnist Josh Rogin likewise asserts that China "is the biggest winner" from the Trump-Kim summit. According to Rogin: "In Chinese President Xi Jinping's wildest dreams, he could not have envisioned a better outcome—at least as it concerns Beijing's interests. After one day of meetings, Trump agreed to halt U.S.-South Korea military exercises, doing exactly

what the Chinese government proposed ahead of the summit. Trump publicly stated he wants to remove all U.S. troops from South Korea, which would be a huge strategic windfall for China.” Atlantic Council scholar Daniel Fried agrees that Kim and China were the principal winners emerging from the summit, while the United States and its allies achieved little of substance.

The opposing faction contends that China actually wanted to see tensions on the Peninsula continue, since that situation tied down U.S. military forces and prevented U.S. leaders from giving issues such as the South China Sea and Taiwan greater priority and attention. Those adopting that view believe that Beijing is not happy about the warming U.S.-North Korean relations and is a major geopolitical loser in the aftermath of the summit. When it briefly appeared that the much-anticipated Trump-Kim meeting would not take place, NBC News correspondent Andrea Mitchell asserted that the event crumbled when China turned against it. Her underlying assumption was that PRC leaders did not relish the prospect of improved relations between Washington and Pyongyang. Writing in the South China Morning Post, Professor Michael Heng even disputes the notion that the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from South Korea would please Beijing. On the contrary, he concludes that such a move might well lead to a united Korea and, even worse from China’s standpoint, might convince Japan and a united Korea to build nuclear weapons, since both countries would then doubt the reliability of Washington’s security guarantees to them.

Harry J. Kazianis, director of defense studies at the Center for the National Interest and executive editor of its policy journal, the National Interest, argues that the summit outcome does not make China a winner. In fact, he contends that China actually is the biggest loser. If Kim follows through with his commitment to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear program, he notes, it would pave the way for Pyongyang to reorient its economy and develop economic ties with the United States as well as Washington’s Asian allies. Such a development, Kazianis argues, would mean that “the balance of power in Asia would be completely transformed.” Pyongyang would become a much more manageable threat, and Team Trump would finally be able to combat the biggest problem Washington faces on the world stage today: a rising China that wants to completely overturn the international system in its favor. In many respects, nothing should “scare China more” than a U.S.-North Korean rapprochement.

Analyst Brahma Chellaney echoes that argument. He even speculates that Trump is deliberately fostering better relations with North Korea to disrupt that country’s alliance with the PRC. Washington’s policy toward Pyongyang, according to his thesis, is part of a wider U.S. containment policy designed to “marginalize” China.

Experts making the argument that China views the outcome of the Singapore summit favorably and benefits from a less acrimonious relationship between Washington and Pyongyang make the better case. Beijing had long advocated a flexible bilateral dialogue to ease the alarming tensions, and the Trump-Kim meeting seemed to reflect that same position. Chinese leaders exhibited worries about the increasingly volatile situation on the Peninsula for years. Beijing’s escalating objections to North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests indicated the extent of Chinese apprehension that the U.S.-DPRK confrontation might get out of hand and spark a second

Korean War. The PRC's mounting willingness to implement international economic sanctions against its ostensible ally pointed to a similar conclusion.

Washington probably would like to lure Pyongyang out of China's orbit. And Xi Jinping's government is not so pleased with the Singapore summit that the regime is neglecting its own ties with North Korea. Indeed, it has moved quickly to restore and enhance the various, somewhat frayed, bilateral economic and strategic links. The post-summit relationship now resembles a triangular one, with Beijing and Washington vying for ways to influence Pyongyang, and the DPRK seeking to use that competition to protect its own interests and strengthen its position. The PRC enjoys a sizable advantage in that competition. Tensions between the United States and North Korea have diminished, but there are a host of troubling issues that could cause a resurgence—especially if Kim tries to renege on his commitment to denuclearization. The United States and the DPRK remain a long way from being allies.

China should feel relieved and vindicated by the results of the summit. Specifically, the PRC benefits significantly from the reduced danger of a military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. With this decreased volatility, the United States, China and other players in the region all benefit from a sense of increased security. Indeed, it is hard to find any real losers from that development.

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