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Denuclearization deal might prove elusive at historic Trump, Kim summit

Kim Gamel

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SEOUL, South Korea — President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will make history when they meet next week in Singapore for the first-ever summit between the rival nations after decades of hostilities that have sometimes brought the world to the brink of war.

That's about the only sure thing when it comes to two unpredictable leaders of nuclear-armed countries who have gone from trading personal insults and threats to talking peace in a matter of months.

At stake are the threat of nuclear war, America's strategic position in Northeast Asia, the future of U.S. military forces in South Korea and Trump's stature as a global leader.

Nevertheless, expectations for a breakthrough in talks over the North's nuclear weapons program are low. Many experts say they will be happy if the two sides could agree on the definition of one word — denuclearization.

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Trump lowered the bar himself in announcing last week that the on-again, off-again June 12 summit was back on just days after abruptly canceling it following angry statements from the North.

“We're not going to go in and sign something on June 12th and we never were. We're going to start a process,” he said, reversing the administration's previous calls for an all-or-nothing deal to scrap the North's nuclear weapons program.

A multistage process would be the best-case scenario, observers say.

“It's pretty clear that there's a strong inclination by both leaders to have a good show, a good PR opportunity, and this is where it gets risky and dangerous,” said Duyeon Kim, a senior research fellow at the Seoul-based Korean Peninsula Future Forum.

“Kim Jong Un, his game plan will be to try to go the peace route. That's another way to get to loosening sanctions and another route to rid US forces from the peninsula and eventually break the U.S.-South Korea alliance,” she said during a panel discussion hosted by the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

The two leaders will meet at the Hotel Capella, a luxury resort on Sentosa Island.

Strategic ramifications

Meanwhile, other countries including China and Russia are maneuvering to influence the summit's outcome, which will have strategic ramifications far beyond the Korean Peninsula.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is reportedly poised to jump on a flight to Singapore for a possible trilateral summit with Trump and Kim as he pushes for a deal to formally end the Korean War, which was suspended but not officially concluded by an armistice in 1953 after three years of fighting.

“Three-way discussions among the South, the North and the U.S. are underway on the declaration of an end to the war,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Noh Kyu-duk said Thursday at a press briefing in Seoul.

And the formerly reclusive 34-year-old North Korean leader, who until the recent flurry of diplomacy hadn't left his country since taking power in 2011, has emerged as an in-demand statesman.

He traveled twice to China to meet with President Xi Jinping, held two summits with Moon in the Demilitarized Zone and has received an invitation to visit Russia in the fall.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was to meet with Trump on Thursday at the White House to try to make sure his country's security isn't compromised in the process. Tokyo also wants the president to press the North to release Japanese who were abducted in the 1970s and 1980s.

Define denuclearization

A key sticking point is the U.S. demand for the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons apparatus, frequently referred to by the acronym CVID.

North Korea has declared a commitment to denuclearization but seeks a “phased and synchronous” approach that would include economic incentives and other rewards for each step.

Trump made the right move by signaling he's prepared for a longer process, said Eric Gomez, a defense analyst with the Washington-based libertarian think tank the Cato Institute.

“Trump has signaled a lot more flexibility in his approach and has lowered his expectations for the summit,” Gomez said in a phone interview.

“It won't produce any sort of big lasting solution, but it will start getting the U.S.-North Korean relationship in a better place overall and, hopefully, create opportunities to keep talking and to keep diplomacy active,” he added.

North Korea has an estimated 60 nuclear warheads and has made strong advances in developing delivery systems, although technical hurdles remain. It test-fired three intercontinental ballistic missiles and conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear test last year.

Former diplomats say it's highly doubtful that Kim Jong Un would be willing to give up his hard-won weapons, which he sees as regime security.

But Kim also has vowed to improve the economy of his impoverished nation and is eager to get relief from U.S.-led international sanctions aimed at depriving him of much-needed foreign currency.

Robert Gallucci, a Georgetown University professor who was the chief negotiator with North Korea during the Bill Clinton administration, said Trump will score a win if he gets Kim to agree on a definition for denuclearization.

But he stressed the end goal must be not only for the North to give up its nuclear weapons but also the components to make them.

“We want no enrichment, we want no reprocessing, so we want no fissile material production capability, no nuclear weapons,” Gallucci said during a recent forum sponsored by the 38 North website.

Joseph Yun, who served as Trump’s main envoy to North Korea until retiring in February, said the president should use the summit to demand a detailed declaration of all nuclear sites and fissile material.

“Without knowing what they have, how are you going to negotiate with them?” Yun said Tuesday during a congressional hearing.

He said the United States could offer in return an end-of-war declaration, regime security assurances and the opening of liaison offices to begin normalizing relations.

Early gains

One of the early casualties of the diplomatic process appears to be the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign, which the president has touted as a key factor in bringing the North to the table.

Trump said last week that he no longer wants to use that term and decided to suspend plans to impose what he described as hundreds of unilateral sanctions that had been readied.

The tough measures that have been slapped on the North as tensions rose in recent years stand, but experts say there’s evidence that China and other North Korean allies already have moved to relax the implementation that had begun to have an effect.

“North Korea in this process has very little to lose,” Yun Sen, a co-director of the East Asia program at the Stimson Center, said in a phone interview.

“It has manipulated the diplomatic situation to force China to re-engage,” she said. “I think on the U.S. side, I don’t think North Korea has really given up anything other than its provocative policy.”

South Korea has already taken steps to improve bilateral relations and eventually restore economic ties with the North, starting with the landmark summit between Moon and Kim on April 27 when they embraced warmly in the truce village in the heavily fortified border.

Seoul and Washington have insisted their alliance remains strong, but Moon was clearly shocked when Trump announced on May 24 that he was canceling the summit without consultation.

The South Korean leader quickly agreed to a request by the North for a second summit the next day.

“Going forward, if Trump wants to prevent decoupling he’s going to have to do a better job of alliance management with the South,” Gomez said.

The communist state also has traditionally linked denuclearization to the removal of U.S. troops and other assets from the region. The Americans provide protection to South Korea and Japan under a so-called nuclear umbrella.

Trump and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis have insisted that the presence of some 28,500 U.S. servicemembers stationed in South Korea is not up for negotiation.

The North Korean leader also reportedly has not raised the subject, but experts say he's likely keeping it on the back burner.

"He doesn't have to go in head-on and demand, 'President Trump, get rid of your troops.' He can do it a different way and that way is the peace process," Duyeon Kim said.