

## Does Trump Get Another Shot at North Korea?

The president's upcoming Beijing trip may provide an opportunity to reengage.

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As President Donald Trump prepares for his upcoming Beijing trip, speculation is swirling again over a possible meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on the sidelines.

At their last summit in Hanoi in February 2019, negotiations collapsed after the two sides failed to bridge the gap between Pyongyang's offer to dismantle nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and Washington's demand for a broader denuclearization package in exchange for major sanctions relief.

Even so, both leaders have reasons to look again, and both have signaled renewed interest. Trump has reiterated his openness to an unconditional talk, while Kim appears receptive on the condition that the U.S. acknowledges its nuclear-armed status.

But the harder question is what either side could realistically gain from a third meeting, whether a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula remains even a plausible objective, and how the ongoing Middle East conflict may have hardened the regime's already strong nuclear obsession.

To gain deeper insights, *The American Conservative* spoke with Moon Chung-in, a former security adviser to South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and the James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University.

### What lessons might Pyongyang draw from the conflict in the Middle East?

The Iran War has reinforced Pyongyang's long-held view of the U.S., namely that when Washington deems it necessary, it is prepared to use military force against North Korea and even seek to decapitate its leadership.

But the reason the U.S. cannot strike North Korea as easily as it did Iraq, Libya, or Iran is precisely that the former possesses nuclear weapons and the means to retaliate. For Kim Jong Un, the lesson will be unmistakable. Nuclear status is not something to surrender, nor is it up for negotiation.

To make its deterrent more credible, North Korea will probably hone its ability to strike U.S. bases in South Korea and Japan, while also strengthening what it sees as "dual deterrence," meaning the ability to hold the U.S. mainland at risk with ICBMs.

To showcase such capability, Pyongyang could conduct more short- and medium-range ballistic missile tests. ICBM tests in 2026 cannot be ruled out either.

### Is another U.S.–North Korea summit still possible?

The 12-Day War last June and the latest Iran conflict have sharply eroded North Korea's trust in the U.S. In both cases, from Pyongyang's perspective, Washington unilaterally derailed talks and attacked Iran while diplomacy was still under way—reportedly even making progress.

Yet Kim may still be willing to meet Trump if denuclearization is not placed at the entrance to negotiations as a summit agenda, but treated instead as the eventual exit point of a broader process.

What Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington seek is North Korea's denuclearization. But that is not deterrence; it's compulsion. It is a policy aimed at forcing the North Korean regime to do what it has no intention of doing.

The crossroad now is whether to accept, at least in practice, that the regime possesses nuclear weapons, and move from there toward non-proliferation, nuclear arms control, and reduction talks, or to continue pursuing a coercive strategy designed to make Pyongyang give up its arsenal.

### **If bilateral talks were to resume, how might negotiations unfold?**

South Korea's President Lee Jae-myung has proposed a three-stage approach. The first step is to freeze North Korea's nuclear and missile activities, including the production of plutonium, highly enriched uranium, and nuclear advancement. The second is to roll back, or at least reduce, the number of nuclear weapons and missiles in its arsenal, along with its stockpiles of both materials, in a verifiable manner. The third, over the longer term, would be to work toward a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons.

North Korea, in return, would likely seek diplomatic normalization with the U.S. and an end to what it calls Washington's hostile intent and policy. That could mean suspending South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises and training, as well as halting the full deployment of American strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang would also demand comprehensive sanctions relief.

In fact, establishing diplomatic ties between the U.S. and North Korea was the first item in the Singapore Declaration of June 12, 2018. In Pyongyang's reading, even a freeze on its nuclear and missile activities should be enough to put normalization on the table.

### **With Washington increasingly focused elsewhere, is it prepared for another summit?**

One problem is timing. Whether Trump meets Kim Jong Un during his mid-May visit to China or on the sidelines of the Shenzhen APEC Summit in November, the runway for serious preparation would be extremely short.

The Trump administration also lacks, at least for now, a deep bench of North Korea specialists. Allison Hooker, the undersecretary of state for political affairs, may be the best placed official, but she appears to have little room for sustained attention to the North Korea file.

The counterpoint is that the familiar North Korea hawks from Trump's first term, including Mike Pompeo, John Bolton, and Matt Pottinger, are no longer in there. Pyongyang also knows that a second Trump administration is heavily top-down. That could allow diplomacy to move quickly, and perhaps make Washington more willing to put major concessions on the table.

**South Korea's spy agency recently assessed that Kim Ju Ae, Kim Jong Un's teenage daughter, is likely being groomed as his heir. How do you read that judgment?**

Talk of succession politics in North Korea seems premature, if not nonsensical, at this stage. Kim Jong Un has tried to distinguish himself from both his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, and his father, Kim Jong Il. Neither projected the image of a leader with a visible family life. The ruling family was shrouded in myth and kept at a remove from ordinary society.

Kim Jong Un, by contrast, is trying to present himself as a more normal leader, even a more relatable one. His public appearances with his teenage daughter, Kim Ju Ae, should be understood partly in that context.

He is also acutely aware of South Korean cultural penetration into the North and has moved aggressively to contain it, including through laws targeting so-called reactionary thought and culture. Seen in that light, Kim Ju Ae serves a domestic purpose. She helps project dynastic confidence while offering North Korean youth a state-sanctioned source of pride and dignity.

**About The Author**

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