A summit conference between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump would be a truly extraordinary event. No US President while in office has ever met a North Korean leader, and Kim Jong-un in his six and half years in power has never met with a foreign leader. The United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have no diplomatic relations, and their troops sit facing each other; in fact, the two countries are technically at war since no peace treaty was ever signed at the end of Korean War, only a ceasefire. The talks, therefore, hold the promise of bringing about the biggest diplomatic breakthrough since the end of that conflict sixty-five years ago, and it could help defuse one of the most dangerous security threats to East Asia and America.

The United States hopes to see the DPRK abandon its nuclear weapons and its missile, chemical and, biological weapons programs. It also would like to see a reduction in its forces, including an estimated 8,000 artillery near the South Korean border. Seoul seeks not only to reduce tensions, but economic cooperation and more cultural exchanges with the North that will bridge the gap between the two Koreas. For P’yŏngyang, besides the internal propaganda value of seeing Kim Jong-un negotiate with the American president as equals, it could bring an end to the UN sanctions that have been imposed since it tested its second nuclear weapon in 2009, a peace treaty with the United States that would remove the threat of a US military action against it, and the resumption of South Korean aid for its ailing economy.

While the summit could bring major benefits for all sides, there are reasons for pessimism. Washington’s and Seoul’s insistence that North Korea give up its weapons of mass destruction runs counter to P’yŏngyang’s persistent demand that it be recognized as a nuclear power. A compromise could be worked out in which the North agrees to halt its nuclear and missile testing in exchange for the end of sanctions. But previous negotiations have not worked out well. In 1991, P’yŏngyang came to an agreement with Seoul on denuclearizing the peninsula. American nuclear weapons were withdrawn from South Korea, but the North went on to test a nuclear device, ignoring the agreement. In 2000, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung went to P’yŏngyang to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright became the first high ranking American official to visit North Korea, and President Bill Clinton hinted that he was interested in making a historic visit there, but little came of this. North Korea went on to test nuclear weapons and carry on provocative acts such as sinking a South Korean destroyer in March 2010 and in November of that year shelling the South Korean island of Yŏnp’yŏngdo.

It is unlikely that Kim Jong-un will give up its nuclear weapons or missiles. They are both a source of protection from US or South Korean military intervention and a demonstration to their own people that they are making progress in keeping their country strong and free. More importantly, his regime needs tensions with Seoul and
Washington at least as much as it needs economic aid, the lifting of sanctions, and the ending of its international isolation. For decades, it has justified the hardships of its people by blaming them on the imperialists using the following assertions: The American imperialists and their South Korean lackeys have reduced the people south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to a state of miserable subjugation and are constantly making feverish preparations to subdue, enslave, and defile the pure, virtuous, free Korean people in the North. Only the heroic effort of the Korean People’s Army and the brilliant leadership of the Kim family prevent them from doing so. Meanwhile, the South Koreans may be somewhat materially well off, but they are not free; only the hope of liberation from the DPRK keeps them going. It is the duty of the North Korean people to prepare for that day.

How much all of this North Koreans really believe is not certain. But what is clear is the existential danger peace would pose to the regime. Peace and greater contact with the outside world, especially with South Korea, would expose this set of lies and undermine the legitimacy of the regime. What would happen if their people realize just how badly off they are compared to their fellow Koreans south of the DMZ? What if they find out that the desire of the Kim family and the small governing elite to maintain their power and privileges are responsible for their suffering? What if the North Korean people discover that rather than waiting to be liberated by their northern compatriots, the people of the South view them as pathetic, backward cousins and worry about the cost of supporting them? Thus, the leadership of North Korea has painted itself in a corner where peace and reform could end with the disintegration of their regime and they could suffer the fate of East German leaders or, worse, a Muammar Gaddafi beaten to death in the streets by his angry people.

While Kim Jong-un and his regime would like to reduce tensions to the degree that the US would withdraw and not directly menace them, North Korea’s leaders would also like the UN sanctions that have hurt their economy to end, and they would welcome South Korean aid. So are the North Koreans really serious about negotiations, or is it just one of the periodic attempts to buy time, get some economic benefits, and then ramp up the tensions? Or is it only a strategy to create a split between Seoul and Washington? The truth is that no one outside the inner circle of the DRPK knows. However, recent history does not provide grounds for optimism.

The Trump-Kim Meeting and East Asian Security
By Zhiqun Zhu

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Donald Trump’s decision in early March 2018 to accept Kim Jong-un’s invitation to meet face to face by June caught many off-guard. Not long ago, the two men were engaged in a fiery war of words and the whole world was holding its breath, fearing one of the maverick leaders may go crazy by touching the nuclear button. “It never occurred to us that such a decision would be made at this time,” said a high-ranking Japanese Foreign Ministry official, describing the shockwaves reverberating in Tokyo.1 China was reportedly concerned that it might be sidelined in the new diplomatic effort to address the North Korea nuclear issue.2 However, Kim Jong-un’s surprise visit to China March 25–28 not only bolstered his position in the upcoming meeting with Trump, but essentially returned China to the center stage of East Asian security. Indeed, right after Kim left China, President Xi Jinping sent a message to Trump briefing him on the Xi-Kim meeting, and State Councilor Yang Jiechi went to South Korea, explaining the details of the meeting to South Korean officials.
Some outstanding issues in East Asian security remain, regardless of how the Trump–Kim meeting will proceed. First of all, the US policy toward North Korea has been inconsistent and incoherent, ignoring North Korea’s security concerns. Since the 1994 Agreed Framework broke down, the successive US administrations have approached North Korea differently. President Bill Clinton sent Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to P’yŏngyang and was planning to visit North Korea himself. President George W. Bush named North Korea part of the “axis of evil” in the aftermath of 9/11. President Barack Obama practiced the so-called “strategic patience” toward North Korea. All have strongly condemned North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, without addressing the root causes of the problem, such as North Korea’s sense of insecurity due to the unfinished Korean War and US troops in South Korea and Japan. To what extent can Trump alleviate North Korea’s security concerns? And what is America’s plan to integrate North Korea into the region’s dynamic economic development?

Secondly, the current US government’s credibility may be in question. Trump’s decision to meet with Kim appeared spontaneous, contradicting the long-standing US position that North Korea must denuclearize first before the two countries can talk. The Trump administration has applied “maximum pressure” on North Korea, hoping to bring North Korea to its knees. Before the February 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, Vice President Mike Pence suggested that there was no daylight between the United States and its allies on the need to isolate North Korea diplomatically and economically until it abandons nuclear and missile programs. Yet, during the PyeongChang Olympics, Pence was clandestinely planning to meet with the North Korean delegation, including Kim Jong-un’s sister. The secret diplomacy was made public when North Korea canceled the meeting at the last minute.

From North Korea’s perspective, it is confusing whether the Trump administration is serious about the summit. Trump’s abrupt replacement of Rex Tillerson with the more hawkish Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State and his pick of the belligerent John Bolton as his National Security Adviser are not reassuring to North Korea. Trump’s dictatorial style makes people wonder how trustworthy he is. If he could simply walk away from the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, why should Kim Jong-un or anybody trust him?

Thirdly, regional countries, particularly China and Japan, have their own interests, even though they all share the common objective of a peaceful Korean peninsula.

The nuclear issue is not the only problem between Japan and North Korea. In past interactions, Japan has pressed North Korea to fully account for the dozens of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s. Japan is likely to squeeze the abduction issue into the current diplomacy, making the situation more complicated. In addition, if North Korea takes concrete steps to denuclearize, a major justification for the Abe government’s constitutional reform will vanish.

Xi said he appreciated Trump’s desire to resolve the North Korea issue politically and hoped all sides could show goodwill to avoid doing anything that might affect or interfere with the improving situation on the Korean peninsula. China has encouraged the direct Trump–Kim meeting, but it will not be a bystander with decreasing influence on East Asian security, and it is unlikely to abandon North Korea, especially when Trump is pressuring China on trade and flirting with playing the Taiwan card.

Finally, the United States and China, as the two major players in the region, have yet to map out a future for East Asia acceptable to all. No matter how the planned Trump–Kim meeting will evolve, without coordinated efforts by regional powers, denuclearization of North Korea may be wishful thinking. China’s continued cooperation is crucial. As former Asian Affairs Senior Director on the National Security Council Jeffrey Bader remarked, the United States must consult with allies and partners before the Trump–Kim meeting, and Xi needs to be consulted early and often. Is Trump willing to share the limelight and credit with Xi?

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Announcement of a possible meeting during spring 2018 between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, leaders of the United States and North Korea, respectively, has not been without controversy. The Trump administration touts the meeting as a diplomatic breakthrough that could well portend greater global outcomes for two reasons: (1) it represents a significant reversal of the heated rhetoric that characterized earlier exchanges between the two leaders, thus providing legitimacy to the administration's earlier histrionics (the president contends that without his “firm, strong will to commit our total ‘might’ against the North” the current breakthrough would not have occurred); and (2) it gives Trump the opportunity to potentially achieve what no other “sitting” US president has ever done—formally meet with a leader of the reclusive North Korean regime. (While former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton visited P’yŏngyang, they did so as special US envoys after leaving office.) Success, however, will not be measured by merely convening a meeting, but rather by how effectively Trump is able to divorce the regime from its growing nuclear capability, the odds against which are staggeringly high.

A fundamental point one must recognize is that the regime's nuclear weapons program is its lifeblood—the great equalizer, from its perspective. It is very unlikely to barter away such a perceived advantage to its perennial archenemy, the United States. It is more likely that the regime is buying itself operational maneuver space at the expense of discussions with the Trump administration, in effect trading time for space. Or the regime may be testing the waters to see what types of concessions it can extract from the US—a recurring method of engagement. One point, however, remains clear. Its nuclear weapons program is one of the few tools of statecraft that allows the regime to garner global attention virtually at will; nuclear test detonations and ballistic missile launches invariably invite swift condemnation from the world community of nations. A consistent goal and theme among all three dynastic leaders has been the continual effort to command the global community’s attention in such a way that the regime is portrayed in a position of strength, but not necessarily in a positive light. Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un's father, once noted that “I am the object of criticism around the world. But I think that since I am being discussed, then I am on the right track.”

When the regime's nuclear weapons program is considered within the broader Juche paradigm, what becomes more easily discernible is that it is firmly ensconced in the determinant of equality; from the regime's perspective, nuclear weapons allow it to successfully hold at bay “big power chauvinism,” in this case represented by the United States. Further, that the regime is prepared to meet with its decades-long enemy in an effort to extract some kind of advantage or benefit...
can be traced back to Juche’s determinants of flexibility, pragmatism, and its need to maintain independence of action. In short, contemporary circumstances have long historical roots in North Korea. Resultantly, any meeting with North Korea should be understood to carry with it huge potential benefits and/or consequences, and thus should not be approached in a transactional manner.

Any US–North Korea meeting carries with it unforeseen geopolitical peril. A common pursuit of North Korean leaders since the days of its first leader, Kim Il-sung, has been to achieve direct talks with the United States as a means of establishing international legitimacy, a huge carrot the US administration has handed the regime. The subtext of this goal is also to drive a wedge between the United States and South Korea, in effect isolating our longtime ally, something to which Trump unwittingly lent credence by intimating that a continued presence of US troops on the peninsula could hinge on favorable outcomes in US–South Korea trade discussions. If indeed a meeting occurs, the regime wins a propaganda coup, i.e., Kim Jong-un would have been able to achieve within a few short months of the Trump administration what his father and grandfather were unable to accomplish during decades of other US presidential administrations—and it is immaterial whether anything of substance is achieved during the meeting. Kim’s stature at home will only be strengthened by such an outcome with an end result that he could: (1) well be likened to his deified grandfather, Kim Il-sung, rather than having his position diminished (the law of unintended consequences); and (2) become ever more intractable in his position regarding the regime’s nuclear program—having one, after all, will have succeeded in bringing the United States to the negotiating table.

During the late ’80s, an article appeared in the San Diego Business Journal titled, “John Wayne in Asia.” While I have been unsuccessful in locating a copy via the internet and a call to the Journal rendered similarly unfruitful results, the article’s message remains indelibly etched in my memory: Western nations are typically less successful in negotiations with Asian countries because they tend to play a short game—seeking immediate gains—rather than pursuing a longer-term strategy more patiently. If the Trump administration meets with the North Korean regime seeking its immediate nuclear disarmament, without fully understanding the many nuances and pitfalls attendant to such discussions and the long history that precedes them, the effort will likely join other failed efforts in history’s trash bin, e.g., the 1994 Agreed Framework and the Six-Party talks that ended in 2009, neither of which successfully mitigated the regime’s nuclear weapons program. With respect to the regime, one important fact remains indisputable—its resilience. Despite the various pejorative descriptors that have been used over the decades to describe North Korea’s behavior or the many attempts at containment or intervention by the global community, the regime has continued to survive since its inception in 1948 while advancing its threat posture to remain “relevant” to any discussion related to the future of the Korean peninsula.

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