

US-North Korea talks: A breakthrough and a gamble

The remarkable announcement of a personal meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un appears welcome news. It points the way out of a crisis that seemed last year to be spiralling out of control, after the exchange of personal and nuclear threats. But the history of talks with North Korea is a story of recurring disappointment and duplicity. A summit meeting without adequate diplomatic groundwork risks emboldening North Korea while setting the stage for a bad deal which sells out American allies, or dashed expectations and a slide to catastrophe.

The fine print

On the face of it, North Korea's offer — unusually conveyed from the White House, by three South Korean officials — is attractive. We are told that Mr. Kim has promised to discuss giving up his nuclear arsenal if his country's security is assured; to hold off from missile or nuclear tests while talks are under way; and to accept that the annual U.S.-South Korea military exercises will continue. He has not demanded a dowry of food or fuel ahead of talks, as in the past. For their part, South Korea and the U.S., mindful of what they called the "mistakes of the past", have rightly promised that sanctions will remain firmly in place, until a deal is in place. However, the devil is in the detail.

First, North Korea's demand for security guarantees is an old one, going back more than a decade. But what does it mean in practice? This could involve simply a U.S. statement of non-aggression, or even a peace agreement that would formally end the Korean War. The Obama administration considered such a discussion, but balked because North Korea had not put denuclearisation on the table. Now, it might have done. But what if North Korea seeks, as it has in the past, a deeper guarantee of security, the dissolution of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and the removal of American troops from the peninsula? Such a move would be hugely destabilising, potentially nudging South Korea towards acquiring nuclear weapons of its own. Yet it might appeal to a president who has spoken disparagingly of alliances and distrusts faraway troop commitments.

Second, how reliable are Mr. Kim's commitments? In the past, the regime has signed up to deals and then walked through loopholes. In 2012, North Korea agreed to halt missile tests in exchange for U.S. food aid. But a few weeks later, it announced a satellite launch which uses the same technology as ballistic missiles. The deal promptly collapsed. Today, North Korea is yet to confirm that it shares the South's interpretation of its commitments. Will it really freeze all tests for the duration of talks? The first challenge will come during the massive U.S.-South Korea military exercises due to be held from March to May. South Korea will probably push for these to be scaled down, to avoid provoking Pyongyang, but they will certainly go ahead. It remains to be seen whether Mr. Kim will hold his nose, or lose his temper.

Third, while Mr. Trump's personal involvement is significant, it is important that diplomacy take into account the range of regional interests.

Involving China

China's role in enforcing sanctions is crucial, contributing to a huge fall in North Korean exports last year. Beijing must be brought along rather than kept in the dark because the sanctions regime will have to be preserved and tightened if talks go nowhere. Japan, which hosts U.S. bases and would be deeply affected in any regional war, is also a key partner. It is encouraging that the South Korean delegation that made this announcement from the White House will be in Japan

soon. One option is to revive the ecumenical format of the six-party talks, which involved all these parties plus Russia between 2003 and 2009, although this, of course, clashes with the President's compulsive need to take credit for any success.

Finally, we should be realistic. North Korea may have promised to discuss getting rid of his weapons, but this is unlikely to happen. As James Clapper, then the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, acknowledged in 2016, the policy is a "lost cause". "They are not going to do that," he warned. "That is their ticket to survival." One must therefore think creatively about desirable outcomes short of de-nuclearisation. This could involve cutting the number of North Korean warheads and missiles, a permanent freeze on tests, intrusive inspections, and measures to block the export of nuclear technology. This will require diligent, expert and experienced diplomacy — big asks for a demoralised, shrunken and marginalised State Department. If the bar is set too high, the resulting disappointment risks pushing everyone back, more forcefully, onto a path of war.

All this might have been handled better. A presidential summit, which confers unusual prestige upon Mr. Kim, ought to have been held back as a concession for a later stage. There is a reason why North Korea has wanted a summit for decades. Now that one is agreed, it is worth testing North Korea's sincerity as long as sanctions are not lifted prematurely. But American forces on the Korean peninsula and the alliance they uphold should not be treated as a bargaining chip. Mr. Trump should proceed with extreme caution.

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