

How a Donald Trump-Kim Jong Un Summit Scrambles the Calculus for Key Players

U.S. president's decision to accept a meeting with North Korea's leader presents surprise diplomatic opening



In a historic diplomatic breakthrough, President Donald Trump accepted an invitation from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to meet "as soon as possible." News of the summit was announced by a senior South Korean official at the White House Thursday evening.

By

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Updated March 9, 2018 10:59 a.m. ET

375 COMMENTS

President Donald Trump's [decision to accept a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un](#) caught the world off guard.

In agreeing to sit down with North Korea's third-generation leader, Mr. Trump has boosted the stature of Mr. Kim—a man [he has ridiculed as “Little Rocket Man” and threatened with “fire and fury”](#)—with a surprise diplomatic opening that left some allies wrong-footed.

For Mr. Kim, who is half the age of Mr. Trump, just getting a summit meeting with the U.S. president is a big win. Neither his father nor his grandfather succeeded in getting a face-to-face meeting with a sitting U.S. president.

Mr. Trump's move represents [a victory for South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in](#), who has pleaded with the U.S. to tone down its rhetoric and [worked assiduously to get negotiations off the ground](#), and others who have pushed for engagement and diplomacy. Other U.S. allies and some veteran negotiators, however, expressed concern that while a summit meeting could lead to a breakthrough in what has been a protracted standoff, it is a risky move that could lead to ill-considered concessions to Pyongyang.

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These skeptics have pointed to the speed with which the deal came together and the unusual way in which it was announced, as well as the unorthodox decision to start talks at the top. And they are exacerbated by Mr. Trump's tendency to extemporize and the North Koreans' long track record of duplicitous negotiation.

As of Friday evening Asia time, North Korea hadn't even confirmed the offer for the summit, nor had it said anything about how and when it might denuclearize or what it

will seek from Mr. Trump in return. The [proposal for a meeting of leaders was conveyed to Washington](#) by a [South Korean delegation after a visit to Pyongyang](#).

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explained Mr. Trump's decision to agree to preliminary talks by citing a dramatic change in Mr. Kim's posture, although he didn't specify exactly what changed beyond Mr. Kim's recent decisions to send a contingent to the Winter Olympics, hold off on nuclear weapons and missile tests and proposing talks.

Mr. Tillerson, speaking to reporters in Djibouti while on a trip to Africa, said the decision to meet was Mr. Trump's. "I think this was the most forward-leaning report that we've had in terms of Kim Jong Un's , not just willingness, but his strong desire for talks," he said. "What changed was his posture, in a fairly dramatic way, in all honesty that came as a little bit of a surprise to us."

One senior administration official said: "It made sense to accept an invitation to meet with the one person who can actually make decisions instead of repeating the, sort of, long slog of the past."

북미 첫 정상회담

美 "대북 최대 압박 계속"



A South Korean soldier walks past TV pictures of U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at a railway station in Seoul on March 9, 2018. PHOTO: JUNG YEON-JE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has cleaved most closely to Mr. Trump's campaign of pressure and sanctions against Pyongyang, found himself caught off guard.

Tokyo expressed support for Mr. Trump. But within hours of the summit announcement, Mr. Abe said he would travel to Washington for meetings with the White House on North Korea.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono was grilled by reporters over Japan's apparent shift to drop its insistence that North Korea first take steps toward denuclearization before diplomacy starts. "We must not give anything of value in exchange for words that anyone can say," he said.

Japan has been one of the U.S.'s closest allies in the pressure campaign on North Korea, and in diplomatic exchanges with other countries it often raises the need to enforce sanctions on North Korea.

Mr. Trump, in a tweet on Thursday evening, said that "great progress" was being made, but added: "Sanctions will remain until an agreement is reached."

In Beijing, Chinese leaders—who have long called for talks with North Korea to reduce tensions in the region—offered a guarded statement of support for dialogue.



[Donald J. Trump](#)

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Kim Jong Un talked about denuclearization with the South Korean Representatives, not just a freeze. Also, no missile testing by North Korea during this period of time. Great progress being made but sanctions will remain until an agreement is reached. Meeting being planned!

[5:08 PM - Mar 8, 2018](#)

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Chinese President Xi Jinping discussed the issue with Mr. Trump by telephone on Friday and said he hoped that the U.S. and North Korea would start dialogue as soon as possible and “strive for positive results,” according to Chinese state television.

Chinese experts on North Korea said Thursday’s breakthrough was due in part to [China’s efforts to support U.N. sanctions and to enhance coordination](#) with the U.S. and other countries on how to put pressure on North Korea.

In Seoul, Mr. Moon was eager to seize on any opportunity to push for diplomacy after a year in which war clouds appeared to be gathering over the Korean peninsula. Mr. Kim’s new year address, in which the North Korean leader expressed a willingness to send a delegation to the Winter Olympics in South Korea, offered just the occasion.

Now, in five short days after the closing ceremony, Mr. Moon—who spent much of last year pleading in vain with Mr. Kim for a meeting, and with Mr. Trump to take military options off the table—has established himself as a central player in a wave of diplomacy that could reshape the geopolitical picture in Northeast Asia.

Mr. Moon, a longtime advocate of engagement with North Korea, started the week by scoring a summit meeting with Mr. Kim in late April. Three days later, he celebrated an even larger coup when his senior aides announced at the White House that Mr. Trump would sit down with Mr. Kim.

Mr. Moon was quick to express his “profound gratitude” to Mr. Trump for agreeing to the summit, saying that his leadership “will be praised not only by the people of the Republic of Korea and North Korea but all people who hope for peace all around the world.”

Whether this new state of affairs lasts will depend on what comes of Mr. Kim’s upcoming summit meetings with Messrs. Trump and Moon.

There is ample opportunity for the talks to founder as the U.S. and North Korea attempt to bridge what appears to be an irreconcilable gap: The U.S. wants to talk about Pyongyang giving up its nuclear weapons, while the North wants to talk as nuclear-armed equals.

“Summits are easy if you just announce them, and if you ignore the important substance that needs to take place at the summit,” says Evans Revere, a former senior State Department official and Korea expert at the Albright Stonebridge Group.

But the biggest victor, for now, appears to be Mr. Kim.

“The North Koreans have long sought a meeting at the head-of-state level with the U.S.,” Mr. Revere said. “The way it’s usually conveyed is that the North Koreans say, ‘At some point, the U.S. and North Korea should sit down, one nuclear weapon state with another, and discuss their relations with each other.’”

“That, based on what I heard last night, is basically what the U.S. president has agreed to do,” he said.

—*Jeremy Page in Beijing and Felicia Schwartz in Washington contributed to this article.*

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