

Korea: Diplomacy for Peace or Preparations for War?

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After a series of high-level meetings between officials from Seoul and Pyongyang, the proposal for a face-to-face meeting between the American and North Korean leaders appeared before President Trump, who without much hesitation accepted, upsetting the last 50 years of relations between the countries.

Donald Trump [tweeted](#):

“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!”

In the blink of an eye, fifty years of international relations were overturned in a tweet. Skillful South Korean diplomacy had also been working towards this end for months. The meetings at the Olympics between Korean diplomats, and in general the good relations between the two countries, have facilitated a thawing of tensions, leading to dialogue that has come after months of insults and threats being thrown between Washington and Pyongyang.

The next move in the White House saw the dismissal of **Rex Tillerson**, with **Mike Pompeo** replacing him as Secretary of State. Even **National Security Advisor H.R McMaster** could be shown the door in what looks like a big shake-up within the White House, with two central matters looming in the coming months and years for the Trump presidency. The American president is focused on creating his legacy, seeking to eclipse that of his predecessors by achieving a peace agreement and trying to avoid a foreign country. The backdrop for these events is a weak American foreign policy exacerbated by the absence of strategic military planning, and a president who has the constant need to give the impression of being strong, in control, esteemed by his colleagues, and not in conflict with a portion of Washington’s security establishment.

Trump’s intention to seek political agreements with his opponents is offset by his inflammatory “fire and fury” statements and his shameful speech to the United Nations threatening to “totally destroy” North Korea (as the Americans already did in the Korean War during the 1950s). In line with this schizophrenic attitude, Tillerson has been removed from office to send two very important messages to Pyongyang and Tehran. If diplomacy

fails, the military option remains on the table.

This military threat, however, is unrealistic if not unattainable, and its consequences unforeseeable. It is strongly opposed by many in Washington as well as by its allies and enemies. Trump, however, loves employing bombastic rhetoric and brinkmanship to reinforce the idea that even the unthinkable may be thinkable. Given the image that he has built in recent months, this madman strategy seems to dovetail with the strategic intentions of the White House. The idea is to present Pyongyang with two options: a diplomatic opening and relative trust in negotiations, but at the same time leaving open the option of war if diplomacy fails. Kim for his part is certainly more rational and grounded in his actions than Trump. His father tried negotiating with Washington a couple of decades ago, only to see the United States allowing it to fail, thus forcing Kim Jong-un to embrace the only possible solution left to him to ensure survival of his country, namely nuclear weapons as a deterrent. While the sanctions and international isolation visited on the DPRK have played a role in bringing Pyongyang to the negotiating table, the acquisition of a credible nuclear deterrent has served to reassure Kim Jong-un, while also strengthening his negotiating hand vis-a-vis Washington.

As evidence of this theory, the proposal for a face-to-face meeting was put to the United States by South Korea, with Kim presumably assenting, even if Pyongyang has yet to respond. But the move is shrewd, showcasing the diplomatic skills of the North Koreans. If Washington were to sabotage the meeting, the blame would fall entirely on the United States, with Pyongyang being left off the hook as they are yet to accept.

There are big question marks over the topic of discussion and over what agreements can be reached in the first meeting. Certain hypotheses can be made, and other requests can already be excluded. For example, it is practically impossible for the peninsula to find itself free from the American presence. The United States is stationed in Korea especially to contain China and increase pressure around Russia, placing ABM systems that threaten the Sino-Russian nuclear deterrent. For the US the issue is much more than simply opposing a country like Pyongyang. The THAAD system is in fact directed at China and Russia, while it has little [operational effectiveness](#) against any missiles launched from North Korea.

The other hypothesis, currently unattainable, concerns the dismantling of Korean nuclear weapons. The request is impossible without an all-encompassing agreement that would see the the US relinquishing its presence on the peninsula. The argument plays in North Korea's favor, because here is Pyongyang contemplating the abandonment of its nuclear weapons, while Washington refused to entertain any thought of abandoning its military position on the peninsula.

Realistically, an intense dialogue could put a halt to provocative exercises by South Korea and the United States, as well as halt Pyongyang's testing of new nuclear-capable missiles. This would then open the way for a continuation of direct negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang while also allowing for the inclusion of other regional actors, namely, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia. It would effectively be a return to the six-party negotiations, which for over a decade attempted to accommodate the concerns of all the parties in an effort to reach a peace deal.

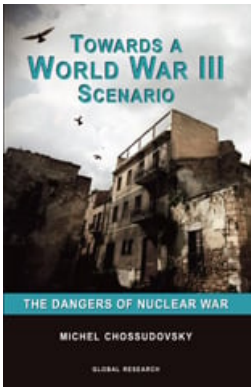
Trump and Kim's unpredictability could bring new twists and turns that further buck the norms and conventions governing international relations. This scenario is certainly

dangerous, but it is also full of possibilities. The personalities of these two leaders could be what will ultimately make the difference.

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This article was originally published on [Strategic Culture Foundation](#).

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-Ellen Brown, author of 'Web of Debt' and president of the Public Banking Institute



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