



Briefing: The Aborted Trump-Kim Denuclearization Summit

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Purpose and Outline: This brief examines the derailment of the Trump-Kim denuclearization summit that was scheduled to take place in Singapore in June 2018. It argues that an outcome satisfactory to the Trump administration—i.e., the complete and rapid denuclearization of North Korea—was always an extremely unlikely outcome of the summit, and that conflicting core interests caused the summit’s cancelation. While certainly not primary, the US’s 8-May withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement might have contributed to the failure.

I. Two Conflicting Views of Denuclearization

President Trump’s May 24 decision to cancel the summit was a product of irreconcilable strategic differences between the US and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). These core conflicts meant that the Trump-Kim summit was a very high-risk/high-reward proposition for the Trump administration. As the summit date approached and it became almost certain that the US would not achieve its goals, President Trump therefore canceled the summit.

The US’s Objectives: The US desired nothing less than the full and rapid denuclearization of North Korea. Washington wanted the denuclearization process to follow the “Libya model,” in which Libya not only abandoned its nuclear weapons program in 2003, but rapidly granted generous access to foreign weapons inspectors and permitted the US to airlift out of Libya hundreds of tons of WMD-related components. In exchange for these concessions, Libya was officially welcomed back into the international community and international sanctions were reversed.

While it remains unclear exactly what “carrots” Washington was prepared to offer Pyongyang in exchange for a Libya-style denuclearization, it seems highly likely that the Trump administration perceived that the current international sanctions regime and the US’s threats to strike the DPRK militarily—including limited “bloody nose” strikes on North Korea’s nuclear facilities—were important factors compelling Kim Jong-Un’s participation in the summit. If so, this view might explain why President Trump reasoned that he did not have to offer substantial, up-front, positive enticements or undergo the step-by-step and time-consuming reciprocal confidence-building measures that are the hallmark of peace-building agreements.

North Korea’s Objectives: If President Trump hoped to achieve a quick, complete, and verifiable nuclear disarmament of North Korea in exchange for removing the threat of US strikes on the DPRK and offering yet-to-be specified, positive enticements, Kim Jong-Un wanted to keep his small but not-insignificant arsenal of nuclear weapons and advanced missile capabilities. In contrast with Washington’s position that the only path to guaranteed peace is through the DPRK’s unilateral nuclear

disarmament, Kim perceives that the only way to guarantee the continuation of his power is by maintaining a nuclear weapons capability. Pyongyang's primary objective, in other words, is to be recognized as a nuclear power.

Under ideal circumstances Kim might have been willing to abandon his nuclear program. These conditions would certainly have included requirements that the disarmament process be gradual and include substantial, reciprocal, confidence-building measures taken by all parties to the agreement. The DPRK's initial concessions would certainly have been minor and would have been designed to maintain the status quo militarily. Kim reportedly offered, for example, to destroy the DPRK's primary nuclear testing site and to stop nuclear and missile testing. In return, he might have hoped to receive immediate sanctions relief, energy assistance, and/or the cessation of US-South Korea military exercises. After many negotiating rounds and years of incremental reciprocal concessions, Kim might have eventually agreed to "denuclearization," a term that Pyongyang has long-insisted means the complete removal of all US troops from South Korea, because America is nuclear-armed and since Washington might use nuclear weapons to save the lives of its troops in the event of hostilities.

In sum, the denuclearization process desired by Kim Jong-Un is the opposite of the one envisioned by the Trump administration. While the failure of the planned summit was therefore almost certainly foreordained, the US withdraw from the Iran Nuclear Agreement might have contributed to its collapse.

II. Iran Agreement Withdrawal

President Trump's 8-May withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement arguably contributed to the failure of the Trump-Kim meeting. If so, it was impactful because it reduced expectations in Pyongyang that the United States could be counted on to follow through on its international agreements. This "trust" would have been critical especially in the event Pyongyang was considering making the kinds of hard-to-reverse and rapid disarmament concessions desired by the Trump administration. Kim Jong-Un certainly understands that it would take much longer for him to redevelop nuclear capabilities than it would for the US to withhold or pull out of whatever commitments it made in the talks.

III. Conclusion

President Trump's initial agreement to meet with Kim Jong-Un was a bold decision. Unfortunately, conflicting security strategies meant that direct talks were never likely to succeed. The US's desire for speed and the complete elimination of the DPRK's nuclear arsenal and nuclear weapons production capability is particularly at odds with Pyongyang's requirement for slowly implemented, confidence-building measures in which its concessions are rewarded immediately and considerably by the US and its allies. Washington's withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement may have contributed to the sense in Pyongyang that the US cannot be trusted and, therefore, an agreement along the lines desired by the Trump administration is far too risky to consider. As of the time of this writing, it remains unclear how the strategic deadlock can be broken via peaceful means.