



For Kim Jong Un, Trump is the Best, and the Last, Opportunity

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The second summit between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un has been set for February 27 and 28 in Vietnam. The question is what kind of progress the two leaders will make after their highly symbolic but unsubstantial meeting in Singapore in June of last year. How much and what kind of concessions will Kim make in his declared efforts of denuclearization? How much will Trump reward Kim with normalizing relations between Washington and Pyongyang as was promised in the last meeting? As many experts speculate over the prospects of the upcoming summit between the two unpredictable leaders, one thing seems to be clear. Mr. Trump represents a unique opportunity for Kim.

Trump is unique because he is the first American president, and possibly the only one, who is willing to meet with Kim without many preconditions. This is exactly what happened in the last meeting, after which many Americans criticized Trump for giving Kim the prestige of sharing a world stage with the American president in exchange for nothing. The second meeting has been set in a similar manner, with Mr. Trump announcing the meeting even as his negotiator is still finalizing the terms and conditions in Pyongyang.

Trump is unique because he is not beholden to the traditional American values of human rights and promoting democracy. In his commentary to the Chair of CSIS Korea, Robert King, a former special envoy for North Korea human rights issues, noted the total absence of the subject in Trump's 2019 State of the Union Speech. It was a sharp contrast to 2018, when the President strongly condemned Kim's human rights abuses, saying "no regime has oppressed its own citizens more totally or brutally than the cruel dictatorship in North Korea."

Everyone knows North Korea has serious human rights issues. Yet, past US insistence that human rights be addressed was one of the main stumbling blocks preventing a nuclear deal with Pyongyang, which suspected the Americans of seeking regime change. In his analysis of the US nuclear negotiation with Libya, Bruce Jentleson of Duke University argued that the Bush administration's focus on achieving policy change of denuclearization instead of regime change was the key to the successful deal with Kaddafi.

Trump is unique also in what King calls his "transactional approach to foreign policy." He is willing to make deals based on raw national interests as well as personal motives. Trump wants a legacy that he can claim nobody has done before. In his speech last week, Trump boasted that he was the one who prevented a major war with North Korea. Stating that there has not been a missile launch in 15 months, he said "as part of a bold new diplomacy," he and Kim "continue our historic push for peace on the Korean Peninsula."

In his New Year Address, Chairman Kim put strong emphasis on North Korea's economic development. If Kim really wants economic reform, he has all the support he needs. As Kim paid his fourth visit to Xi Jinping after his speech in January, it is no secret that China wants to see Kim pursue Chinese-style economic reform and willingness to provide the necessary support. Perhaps more importantly, South Korean President Moon Jae-in wants to see the North Koreans prosper instead of regime collapse. In his New Year's news conference, Moon mentioned the possibility of reopening Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Geumgang Tours as part of broadening inter-Korean economic cooperation.

In his National Security Strategy paper published December last year, Moon made it clear that his government wants to build a permanent peace regime on the Peninsula which will lead to sustainable development in inter-Korean relations and common prosperity. Moon's peace drive reflects the sentiment of the South Korean public. In the latest Korea Gallup poll, 65 percent of South Koreans indicated that they preferred a gradual unification to a rapid absorption of the North, which had only 19 percent support. And 12 percent stated that they did not want any unification at all.

Yet, with US sanctions, neither Beijing nor Seoul can help Kim with his ambitious economic initiative. The good news is that now Kim has another big supporter for his economic agenda: Mr. Trump. Trump tweeted that he "looks forward to meeting Chairman Kim who realizes so well that North Korea possesses great economic potential." In his latest tweet, Trump again emphasized that "North Korea, under the leadership of Kim Jong Un, will become a great Economic Powerhouse. He may surprise some but he won't surprise me, because I have gotten to

know him & fully understand how capable he is. North Korea will become a different kind of Rocket - an Economic one!”

The real challenge is what concessions Kim is willing to make. Kim has to make a strategic decision to show the skeptics and the world a convincing case for North Korea’s denuclearization efforts. That will require a delicate balancing act between his impulse to hedge by maintaining a certain level of nuclear capability and meaningful denuclearization of North Korea’s nuclear material stockpile and production capability, as well as ICBMs and related technologies.

The second summit will not solve all the denuclearization issues. But it ought to result in concrete enough measures as a starting point for a real peace process on the Korean Peninsula. Trump is the best, and maybe the last, opportunity Kim has now. But time is running out fast as the Trump presidency is increasingly consumed by mushrooming political scandals, special counsel Mueller’s investigation, opposition from House Democrats, and the possibility of impeachment. Let Mr. Trump declare a real deal of the century before it is too late. But ultimately, it is all up to Kim.

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