



Daily Comment

# Three Key Questions About Donald Trump's Summit with Kim Jong Un

By [Evan Osnos](#)  
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Photograph by Jean Chung / Bloomberg / Getty

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On February 21st, 1972, President Richard Nixon arrived in Beijing to meet with Chairman Mao Zedong, ending twenty-five years of hostility between the United States

and China. The preparations had been painstaking: more than three years earlier, Henry Kissinger, the national-security adviser, began hinting to Beijing that Nixon might be the President to reopen relations. In 1971, Kissinger held secret meetings with Premier Zhou Enlai, logging dozens of hours of negotiations. That July, Nixon announced his plan, but it took another seven months of diplomatic preparation before he finally ventured to China for what he rightly called a “week that changed the world.”

By comparison, Donald Trump’s [decision to meet](#) with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, is unfolding in an instant. On Thursday, upon learning that South Korea’s national-security adviser, Chung Eui-yong, was in the West Wing, meeting with various officials, Trump asked him into the Oval Office. When Chung told Trump that Kim wanted to meet with him, Trump gave an immediate yes and invited Chung to announce to the White House press corps the most audacious diplomatic gamble by an American President in decades. If the meeting takes place — and that is by no means guaranteed — it will be the first-ever encounter between a sitting American President and a leader of North Korea since the founding of that nation, in 1948.

Many diplomats were appalled by the announcement of a Presidential summit without the usual stages of lower-level talks in advance. But a senior Administration official told reporters that the White House is happy to depart from the usual rules of diplomacy with North Korea. “Literally, going back to 1992, the United States has engaged in direct talks at low levels with the North Koreans, and I think that history speaks for itself,” the official said.

The prospect that Trump might attempt a breakthrough on North Korea, much as Nixon, the once-virulent anti-Communist, had turned toward China, has been a tantalizing prospect since Trump’s election. In [a prescient essay](#) published a year ago in *Foreign Affairs*, John Delury, a North Korea expert at Yonsei University, in Seoul, wrote, “Like it or not, North Korea’s nukes are a reality. The United States needs a new strategy for dealing with Kim — and Trump is well placed to deliver it.” According to the White House, the summit is due to happen “by May,” leaving a narrow window to settle three essential questions:

## **What is a realistic standard of success?**

Officially, the American objective at the summit is to secure a firm agreement that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons. That should be understood as a notional ideal and a real-life impossibility. No serious analyst believes that Pyongyang is preparing to dismantle its nuclear arsenal anytime soon; it is the cornerstone of the propaganda that the Kim family uses to persuade its people that it deserves to rule. If North Korea gave up its weapons tomorrow, it would be little more than a very poor version of South Korea, a fact that would seriously undermine the family's claim. North Korea is embracing the vague prospect of denuclearization as a way to get Trump to the table. Once the parties are there, they will need to identify clear, achievable steps forward in order to insure that no one goes home empty-handed. "The White House must prepare effectively and set a clear agenda for talks—insisting on independent inspection and continuing economic sanctions," Senator Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat of Connecticut, tweeted. "Diplomacy is always a positive step, but high-risk talks between Pres. Trump and Kim Jong-un should be met with skepticism. We cannot afford another Presidential reality show."

## **Where, what, and how?**

In television terms, a summit is not a reality show but a scripted drama. The right location, staging, and choreography are all essential components. Within hours of the White House announcement, officials were discussing whether Trump would invite Kim to talks in the United States. It would be astonishing if he were to accept any such invitation. Since taking power, in 2011, Kim has not stepped beyond the borders of his own country, largely out of fear of assassination or a coup. (There is always the chance of a surprise: he dispatched his sister Kim Yo Jong to Pyeongchang for the Olympics last month, making her the first member of the family to set foot in South Korea.) One possible location is Panmunjom, the divided village on the border of North and South Korea where the two Koreas have met for talks. Kim might invite Trump to Pyongyang, but he would be unwise to accept. Foreign leaders have learned that by flattering Trump with red carpets and brass bands, they can elicit compliments and gratitude that undermine his objectives. (Flush with an extravagant reception in Beijing

last November, Trump gushed that President Xi Jinping is a “very special man.”) That temptation is especially important to avoid in the case of North Korea, which has sought a meeting with an American President for decades. Now that the White House has conceded to the request for a Presidential summit, it must find a way to convert that gesture into an equivalent concession. The Administration could, for instance, insist that North Korea release three Americans who are being held in jail there. Their safe return would be a natural first step to setting the conditions for a productive summit.

### **What is Plan B?**

After the announcement of the meeting, Daniel Russel, a former Assistant Secretary of State who is now a diplomat-in-residence at the Asia Society, identified one of the major risks in putting the two leaders together at the beginning of a negotiation rather than the end. “Once you’ve deployed your top gun, there isn’t a lot of diplomatic space left,” Russel told me. “And then, if Trump meets with Kim but fails, what next?” As a hedge against that failure, the sides may well end up postponing firm commitments on denuclearization while focusing on a more achievable goal, such as simply continuing communications. It won’t satisfy hawks on either side, but the symbolism of the meeting itself could be productive.

From the outside, it is easy to underestimate how much of North Korea’s threats and bizarre expressions of aggression reflect its sense of vulnerability and wounded pride, its frustration at the isolation and the failure that have characterized so much of its history during the past century. Such internal political chemistry has often played a larger role than we in the West have sometimes realized. During Nixon’s trip to China, he paused at the airport to shake Zhou Enlai’s hand — and in doing so helped mend a decades-old source of Chinese humiliation. In 1954, at a conference in Geneva, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, a dedicated anti-Communist, had conspicuously ignored Zhou’s proffered hand. The Chinese political class had never forgotten the slight. Zhou told Nixon, “Your handshake came over the vastest ocean in the world—twenty-five years of no communication.”

Nixon later said that the mark of a leader “is whether he can give history a nudge.” The world will soon discover if Trump and Kim can meet that test.



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