



**Comment**

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## Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un's Nuclear Summit and the Bid for History

In Kim's attempt to unleash the economy and hold on to his dictatorship, he seems to be taking a lesson from China's Communist Party: change, or die.

By **Evan Osnos**

In the city of Pyongyang, the sanctum sanctorum of the Workers' Party of Korea, there are changes afoot that would have vexed Stalin. Repression has not dimmed, but, to indulge the aspirations of the young North Korean élite, a class known to foreigners as "Pyonghattan," the government has permitted the odd yoga class, squash court, and sushi bar. In Chinese-made taxis, which have proliferated since 2013, the meter starts at a dollar, an exorbitant sum for the average worker in the countryside, but unremarkable for residents of the capital. The drivers pay a fee to the state and keep the profits, in one of many quasi-capitalist accommodations that the government has adopted in recent years to defuse demands for a more modern life.

Illustration by Tom Bachtell



North Korea is on the cusp of the largest step yet in its budding, fitful engagement with the outside world. Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump's bid for history, the nuclear summit, is expected to take place on June 12th, at Singapore's five-star Capella Hotel, on a tiny island overlooking the Singapore Strait. Once home to pirates who ambushed passing ships, the island was known, in Malay, as Pulau Belakang Mati, or the Island Where Death Lurks Behind. In 1972, it was designated a tourism site and, fortunately for the summit, renamed Sentosa, which means peace and tranquillity. The story of how the two nations reached this point, just months after threatening each other with nuclear war, is often framed as a cascade of sudden events, which started on New Year's Day, when, in a speech, Kim expressed a desire to "alleviate the tensions." South Korea's President, Moon Jae-in, seized on the overture, first at the Olympic Games and then in April, when he walked hand in hand with Kim across the fortified border between their countries. By May, the United States and North Korea were preparing, haltingly, for a summit that Trump described as a "get-to-know-you situation."

But Kim's push to end his country's isolation didn't begin on New Year's Day. As the reforms in Pyongyang make vivid, Kim is under growing pressure to raise the living standards of the population. In his attempt to unleash the economy and hold on to his dictatorship, he seems to be taking a lesson from China's Communist Party: change, or die.

Until recently, North Korea largely avoided Chinese lessons. The Kim dynasty, which has ruled the nation since its founding, in 1948, solidified its power by insulating the country from foreign ideas and exposure. The Kims maintained control by promoting the illusion that, even in poverty, North Korea was a "socialist paradise." As North Korea crawled out of famine, China's leaders suggested a solution from their history. In the late nineteen-seventies, the political mayhem of the Communist Party had left China with a per-capita income a third that of sub-Saharan Africa. When Deng Xiaoping came to power, in 1978, he shifted China's focus from "class struggle" to "economic development," sparking an economic rebirth under a system that became known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

Kim Jong Il, the father of Kim Jong Un, was unconvinced. He experimented halfheartedly with "special economic zones" before settling on a "military-first" policy, which prioritized defense spending. Kim Jong Il died in 2011, and his heir faced a perilous fact: the national myth was failing. Foreign TV shows and movies, smuggled in from China on DVDs, flash drives, and cell phones, were spreading fast, allowing North Koreans to see just how far they had fallen off the pace of the

world. Kim promised that the people would “never have to tighten their belts again,” and set about giving them more economic control. In 2013, he stepped beyond the “military first” mantra to proclaim a policy of “dual progress,” which gave equal weight to the development of nuclear weapons and to the economy. The government encouraged students and businessmen to visit China and “learn from the Chinese.”

North Korea will never simply import China’s system, and Pyongyang is wary of Beijing’s influence. But, in recent years, as President Xi Jinping has intensified political control, the Chinese model has become easier for Pyongyang to adapt. “Xi Jinping has narrowed the gap between the configuration of their system and what Kim wants: No more collective leadership. No more term limits. No particular stigma attached to sending your comrade-in-arms to jail,” Daniel Russel, the vice-president of the Asia Society Policy Institute, said recently. By 2017, nearly half of North Koreans were involved in some form of private enterprise—driving, selling noodles, renting out spare bedrooms. South Korea’s intelligence service estimates that the North’s private sector is comparable in size to those of Hungary and Poland shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. This spring, in a moment reminiscent of China’s 1978 declarations, Kim announced his decision to direct “all efforts” toward “economic construction.” John Delury, of Yonsei University, in Seoul, said, “It’s impossible not to hear echoes of Deng.” He added, “Kim is breaking North Korea out of some of its ruts.”

How far that spirit will extend at the summit is difficult to predict. A conceivable outcome would be a joint statement that establishes the ultimate goal of removing nuclear weapons from North Korea, in return for assurances against an American attack and steps toward a peace treaty that would, at last, end the Korean War. Kim’s goal is, of course, to insure the survival of his state. Having developed the security of a nuclear weapon, he has turned to the economy, but it can thrive only if he achieves relief from sanctions and gains access to the kind of foreign capital that aided China’s awakening. In effect, Kim and Trump will be negotiating a swap: some level of weaponry for some level of growth, and each will be trying to set the price.

The outcome will rest largely on Kim’s conception of his own path to political survival. At thirty-four, he stands to rule his country for decades, and the ever-rising expectations of his people will pose a greater threat to him over time. “His current situation of total state control is not sustainable,” Abigail Grace, who was, until last month, an Asia adviser at the National Security Council, said. “It’s entirely possible that Kim Jong Un has recognized that, on a five-to-ten-year time horizon,

trouble could arise.” As in China forty years ago, North Korea’s leadership knows that it cannot stand still. Kim may well follow China’s course of moving carefully but persistently, in order to, as the Party elder Chen Yun put it at the time, “cross the river by feeling for the stones.” ♦

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