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Opinion | Glyn Ford

A new Trump-Kim summit would be a nightmare for everyone but Pyongyang

A bilateral deal that is acceptable to both Washington and Pyongyang would come at a steep cost to US allies and the region as a whole

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It is clear that US President Donald Trump is pushing hard for a fresh summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in the coming months. To achieve that, he appears prepared to downgrade and jeopardise the US-South Korea alliance, as seen in his recent move to scale back joint military exercises.

For Trump, this will be a purely bilateral exercise, with both Seoul and Beijing totally sidelined, let alone Moscow and Tokyo. Equally, there is now a general acceptance that the issue of denuclearisation will not be on the table at any future summit. Trump is looking for an outcome that protects US security interests, while Kim's interests are in de facto recognition as a nuclear weapons state, sanctions relief and investment.

Kim has a functioning nuclear arsenal but lacks any reliable intercontinental delivery system. South Korea and Japan are easy targets for his short and intermediate range missiles, but Pyongyang currently has only tested engines for an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that can hit the mainland United States. It lacks re-entry technology, payload capacity for multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles and pinpoint guidance capacity.

In these circumstances, constructing a bilateral deal where both sides can credibly claim a win – at least to their own domestic audiences – is a challenge but nevertheless possible with some misdirection. However, this will come at considerable cost to their friends and neighbours who will suffer serious collateral damage. Washington and Pyongyang can be expected to collude to save face.

An undated promise for future denuclearisation talks that take place well after Trump's term ends will mitigate embarrassment in Washington. Kim will glibly announce that North Korea has completed all necessary nuclear and ICBM testing and is henceforth shifting efforts from development to production.

However, an end to ICBM testing and the prospect of early testing of a second hydrogen bomb and warhead miniaturisation leave Kim a serious and dangerous threat to Seoul and Tokyo, even as Washington gets a pass.

Kim would be rewarded with the North being recognised as a nuclear power, a partial lifting of UN sanctions, some degree of normalisation of relations with the US and the prospect of massive industrial investments in its rare earth deposits. He would also see either the creation of a triad of new see-saw relations between Moscow, Washington and Beijing or North Korea being welcomed out of its current pariah status when Russia's invasion of Ukraine ends.

Meanwhile, Trump would be able to claim he has made the US safer, secure access to the North's rare earths for American corporations and possibly break off a piece of the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang axis.

A deal that protects the US at the price of leaving its Japanese and South Korean allies exposed is dangerous for northeast Asia and the world as a whole. It would change the regional calculus with its threat to roll back the American nuclear umbrella over northeast Asia, regardless of Washington's official rhetoric. Seoul and Tokyo would be totally exposed to future asymmetric negotiations over cost-sharing with the US. Worse still, trust that takes decades to build would be destroyed in days.

South Korea's response would almost certainly be to go nuclear. A Gallup Korea poll from last month showed almost two-thirds support for the country acquiring its own nuclear weapons, and such a deal would see any remaining opposition fall away. Pyongyang would welcome such a move as a retrospective justification of its own programme and a guarantee that there would never be any future suggestion of their denuclearisation.

People watch the news about North Korea's missile tests on a television screen at a station in Seoul, South Korea, on August 20. Photo: EPA

Tokyo would certainly follow Seoul's path. Japan has already prepared legislation to allow a referendum to revise Article 9 of the country's constitution, and nationalist Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is keen to put it to use. The fear factor whipped up will carry the legislation to a majority. Taipei might even follow. Europe and China might threaten sanctions over such a move, but Trump would not join in given his repeated demands that Seoul play a bigger role in its own defence.

This would signal the end of nuclear non-proliferation as the current club of nine nuclear powers would grow to 11 or 12. Around the world, the unthinkable would become likely. Countries that saw possessing nuclear weapons as impossible would start to see them as an option.

The current crisis on the Korean peninsula might in fact be nothing compared to what might follow its resolution. As things stand, the most significant danger to international arms control is a deal between Trump and Kim.

This article is based on a speech given at this week's Xiangshan Forum in Beijing.

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