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ANALYSIS

The Putin-Kim Summit Kicks Off a New Era for North Korea

Pyongyang has given up on normalizing relations with Washington.

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This week's expected summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is widely seen as an act of desperation by the two regimes. Putin's forces seem to be so depleted in Ukraine—and the Kremlin so short of allies—that Russia needs to ask North Korea for ammunition and missiles. Kim, in turn, likely has a shopping list of items he wants from Putin. In this reading, the summit and the warming of Russian-North Korean relations that preceded it are not much more than tactical moves: a calculated effort by Kim to use Putin's predicament to gain diplomatic leverage, access to Russian military technology, and an economic lifeline for his repressive regime.

But we should be clear that Kim's move toward Russia is neither tactical nor desperate. Rather, it is the result of a fundamental shift in North Korean policy, finally abandoning a 30-year effort to normalize relations with the United States. Without understanding how persistent Pyongyang was in pursuit of normalization from 1990 through 2019, there is no way of understanding the profundity of the current shift and what it portends.

Kim's grandfather and ruling dynasty founder, Kim Il Sung, formulated that policy at the end of the Cold War to move out from under the shadow of a collapsing Soviet Union and an overbearing China. His son, Kim Jong Il, followed it by adopting a dual-track strategy of normalization plus nuclear development. Although Kim Jong Un greatly enhanced his country's nuclear and missile programs, he still took several serious steps between 2012 and 2019 to demonstrate his willingness to address the nuclear issue with the United States as the price for markedly improved relations. But as these programs advanced, rather than bring the Americans back to the table, normalization seemed ever more out of reach. The perceived need to appear tough and avoid any suggestion of weakness was a constant in North Korean policy over the next five years, not as an end in itself but as part of a continued strategy to open the path to normalization of relations. It was in these periodic efforts to resume talks that Pyongyang signaled that the core of the normalization policy started in 1990 remained intact.

In the summer of 2021, however, evidence for a fundamental shift emerged—many months prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It appears to have been the

culmination of a long policy review by Pyongyang following the failed U.S.-North Korean summit in Hanoi in February 2019. Initially, the summit was followed by a period of diplomatic pouting. Kim was angry and embarrassed by how his offer, in his perception, was rejected by the United States as then-U.S. President Donald Trump just walked away.

Through 2020 and into 2021, Pyongyang signaled that the door remained open—if only a crack—to engage with Washington. The first few months of the Biden administration were frustrating for Washington because Pyongyang was not answering the phone. Kim appeared to have been watching to see if Biden was really prepared to move in a new direction. By August 2021, immediately after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, there were clear signs that North Korean policy was changing, with significantly more forward-leaning support for Russia and China. That continued through the autumn, with items appearing on the North Korean Foreign Ministry website expressing support for Russian claims to the Kuril Islands and linking the Taiwan issue with the “potential danger of touching off a delicate situation on the Korean Peninsula.”

The hammer came down in January 2022, with a Politburo meeting at which the “sector concerned” was ordered to “reconsider on an overall scale the trust-building measures that we took on our own initiative ... and to promptly examine the issue of restarting all temporarily suspended activities.” Two months later, in March, came the first launch of what the North claimed was a new intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States, finally breaking the 2018 commitment not to launch such missiles. At the same time, work was resumed at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site.

What we’ve seen since is a progression of statements and actions that reflect a new worldview, essentially a judgment that the previous policy of seeking normal relations with the United States as a buffer against North Korea’s big-power neighbors had totally failed. It appears that Pyongyang has concluded that long-term geopolitical trends call for a realignment with Moscow and Beijing as the most practical and probably safest path for North Korea to follow.

If that means opening North Korean airspace to Russian reconnaissance overflights, ports to the Russian Navy, and airfields to advanced Russian fighter aircraft—all of which happened before, in the mid-1980s—then Pyongyang will likely agree. If it means enhanced North Korean military support for Russia’s war in Ukraine and enhanced Russian nuclear and missile support to Pyongyang, we should not be surprised.

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