



Second Trump-Kim summit risks US credibility

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President Trump hopes to use a second summit with North Korea's Kim Jong-un in the coming weeks to jumpstart progress on dismantling the North's nuclear program, but Kim's recent statements and Pyongyang's clandestine work on its program raise serious questions about the President's approach.

To be sure, Kim has maintained his freeze on nuclear or ballistic missile testing that set the stage for the first Trump-Kim summit of last June in Singapore, and he has tamed the fiery rhetoric that marked his previous pronouncements about the United States and a potential military confrontation with it.

But, when it comes to its nuclear capacity, Pyongyang hasn't sat still since June. Quite the contrary, the "hermit kingdom" has made significant progress in expanding its nuclear arsenal — which, of course, is precisely the opposite of what Trump hopes to accomplish through personal diplomacy.

While maintaining the freeze on nuclear and ballistic missile testing that he started in November of 2017, Kim claims that he has followed through on pledges to dismantle a satellite launch facility and destroy tunnels at a former nuclear weapons site. But even if true, many experts downplay the significance of such measures because Pyongyang could reverse them quickly and, more to the point, because North Korea has a nuclear infrastructure that extends across multiple sites.

Of greater importance is what the North is doing quietly in other parts of its nuclear program. Just a month after the June summit, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo acknowledged to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Pyongyang is continuing to "produce fissile material." Asked for more information, Pompeo replied that he'd like to give it the committee in a private session.

Pyongyang's progress, however, is an open secret to nuclear experts. As the Straits Times reported in recent weeks, "satellite-imagery analysis and leaked American intelligence" show that North Korea is producing rockets and warheads as quickly as ever. Specifically, the Singapore-based newspaper wrote, the North has added several intercontinental ballistic missiles and enough fissile materials for six more nuclear bombs, giving Kim's regime a total of more than 20 bombs.

In essence, Kim is capitalizing on the North's prior nuclear advancements to make more progress quietly. That is, its program has reached the stage at which it doesn't need much if any more testing. With such an advanced program, the North can work clandestinely to bolster its nuclear and ballistic weapons.

None of this is particularly surprising in light of what Kim himself said recently. With all necessary testing completed, Kim declared in his annual New Year's Day address to his nation, "the nuclear weapons research sector and the rocket industry should mass-produce nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles." If so, Robert Litwak, a Senior Vice President at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, told NBC News, the North could have 100 nuclear warheads by 2020.

Where do we go from here?

Kim is demanding more from the United States. In that New Year's Day speech, North Korea's strongman said that Washington must first lift sanctions before he will do anything else. Longer term, he wants (among other things) an end to U.S. sanctions and to its nuclear weapons in the region.

To this point, Trump has demanded North Korea's "complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization" before he would lift sanctions. Easing that stance now would undermine his credibility at home and abroad and also subject him to the same criticism that President Obama faced when he back-tracked on numerous demands in order to secure the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran.

The President, however, has offered unilateral concessions before. After the first summit, he canceled military exercises between the United States and South Korea without securing anything of tangible value in return.

Who will blink first?

At the moment, Trump seems more eager for a deal than Kim. He has reportedly chafed in recent months as progress in the aftermath of Singapore has stalled, and he surely would like the kind of agreement with North Korea that eluded his predecessors and would validate his negotiation skills.

As for Kim, U.S. and global sanctions aren't preventing Pyongyang from making progress on its nuclear program, which the regime has long considered its insurance policy against a U.S. or other external attack. Moreover, despite the continued suffering of North Korea's people under his brutal authoritarian rule, the young leader faces no serious, discernable internal threats to his rule.

So, will Trump convince Kim, in exchange for reduced U.S.-North Korean tensions and economic sweeteners, to dismantle the program that the Kim dynasty worked so hard to develop in order to protect itself?

Color me skeptical.

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