



What Iran Can Teach Us About North Korea Summit

March 11, 2018 **Ilan I. Berman** *U.S. News & World Report*

Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Military Innovation; Missile Defense; Warfare; Iran; North Korea

You could call it the Iranian negotiating model.

After months of escalating tensions with the United States, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has offered to meet directly with President Trump, engendering cautious optimism from many who see this as a necessary first step to de-escalation in Asia. The White House has tentatively agreed to the meeting. And yet, without deft handling, this dialogue could allow one of the world's worst rogue states to reap enormous dividends as a result of its irresponsible conduct - much as happened with Iran in the not-so-distant past.

Here, a history of nuclear negotiations with Iran, which produced the agreement formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is in order.

The impetus for those talks - which commenced quietly in 2012 and continued publicly from 2013 to 2015 - wasn't a genuine change of heart on the part of the Iranian regime. The Islamic Republic quite clearly still seeks to acquire a nuclear capability and, through it, to become a regional hegemon, even if its officials are shrewd enough not to say so publicly.

Rather, in the face of escalating pressure on the part of the United States, Tehran calculated that nervousness over the potential for real military conflict would inexorably nudge Washington and its diplomatic partners toward the nuclear negotiating table as long as the Iranian side appeared ready for compromise. Iran's leaders gambled correctly, and the product was a nuclear deal that many on both sides of the U.S. political aisle now agree was a colossal blunder that has greatly empowered the Iranian regime at the expense of regional stability across the Middle East.

The lesson hasn't been lost on the North Koreans. Pyongyang has long served as an important strategic partner for Tehran's clerical regime, collaborating closely and extensively with the Islamic Republic on ballistic missile work and even on critical nuclear know-how. As a result, North Korean officials had a front-row seat to the unfolding negotiations between Iran and the six nations that include America, and saw how Tehran made enormous political, economic and strategic gains as a result.

Not surprisingly, they concluded that the same sort of arrangement could be greatly beneficial to North Korea as well. Which is why, at the tail end of the Obama administration, Pyongyang quietly put out diplomatic feelers (via intermediaries in Beijing and elsewhere) regarding the possibility of similar framework talks with the United States.

The Obama administration's time in office elapsed before those overtures could be explored in earnest, however, and the advent of the Trump era heralded a more robust approach toward North Korea than the policy of "strategic patience" that had prevailed in Washington. Now, it looks like the North Koreans might get their wish after all.

For the moment, White House officials insist that there are, as yet, no plans for comprehensive talks with the Kim regime, and that the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula remains a core objective of any U.S. approach. This is clearly good news. So, too, are the Trump administration's continued efforts to resolutely tackle the North Korean challenge - a complex strategic problem that was mishandled by successive administrations long before Trump took office.

Even so, as the White House pivots toward the idea of dialogue with Pyongyang, something at which it once scoffed, it would be advised to keep in mind what the last such discussions helped to create: an empowered and emboldened Iran, and a constrained America. After all, you can be sure that the North Koreans are thinking about the very same things. Just as certainly, they are seeking precisely the same sort of outcome.

Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington.