

3 Steps Trump Should Take Before Meeting Kim Jong Un

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



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Failure to prepare properly for such an important summit would carry significant risks.

President Donald Trump's unexpected decision to meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has elicited sharply divided responses. The White House has presented the proposed summit as a diplomatic coup, while advocates of engagement have greeted it with guarded relief. Skeptics have described it as naive at best, given Kim's atrocious record of abuses, and a disgrace at worst. Yet history will judge the meeting by a simpler metric—whether it succeeds.

If the meeting between the two mercurial leaders is to be successful, Trump must be willing to delay it or even to forgo it altogether if circumstances warrant. Any summit between heads of state requires intensive preparation, this one more than perhaps any other.

That preparation should take three forms.

First, lower-level U.S. officials should meet with their North Korean counterparts to gauge Pyongyang's intentions. South Korean officials have asserted that Kim is prepared to sacrifice a nuclear weapons program four decades in the making that is widely regarded as vital to the security of the Kim regime and to its fantasies of conquering South Korea. Such a shift would be stark, and U.S. officials should treat Seoul's representations with skepticism until more evidence emerges.

Second, the United States will need to consult extensively with its Asian partners in advance of any summit. The outcome of U.S.-North Korea talks will impact the security of not only U.S. allies such as Japan but also rivals such as China and Russia. It is important that the United States maintain a united front with the former to ensure that diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula does not further fragment the U.S. alliance system in Asia and consult with the latter to ensure that it is prepared to play a constructive role in any diplomatic process.

Thirdly, the United States needs to engage in internal deliberations to determine precisely what it is seeking to

accomplish in a Trump-Kim summit and more broadly what the country is prepared to concede in exchange for what it demands of Pyongyang.

To this end, Washington should hold fast to a goal of North Korea's complete denuclearization. In the Iran nuclear negotiations, the United States incrementally downgraded its ambitions as the talks proceeded. The reason given was that the original aims were simply not achievable, however desirable.

Such thinking, however, neglects the fact that U.S. actions away from the negotiating table, whether in the form of sanctions or military posture, can shape the calculations of counterparts. To broaden the range of possible diplomatic outcomes, the United States must take steps to worsen the other side's alternatives to a deal, even if it means suspending negotiations for a time. If instead the United States accepts a partial solution—a freeze of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs or their partial dismantlement—negotiators would risk simply delaying a crisis while sacrificing U.S. leverage in the process.

In considering what the United States is prepared to offer in exchange for North Korea's denuclearization, it is vital that the Trump administration stays focused on the big picture in Asia. As troublesome as the North Korea challenge has been, it is not America's greatest strategic threat in the region. That honor belongs to an increasingly powerful and ambitious China, and perhaps secondarily to Russia, which has demonstrated a desire to challenge the United States across multiple theaters.

The United States would be cutting off its nose to spite its face if, to secure an agreement with Pyongyang, the White House agreed to significant reductions in U.S. military posture in Asia. The biggest beneficiary of such a step would be Beijing, and the biggest loser would be the alliance system that the United States must cultivate in Asia to counter Chinese ambitions.

Unless and until the United States is able to adequately prepare for a Trump-Kim summit, it should hold off on finalizing a date. Failure to prepare would carry significant risks. The summit could turn into nothing more than a public relations coup for Kim, who would crow about securing a meeting that was denied to his father and grandfather. Even worse, a failed summit might leave no clear next diplomatic step and ultimately hasten rather than defuse conflict.

The good news is that the United States need not be desperate for a deal, as it does not lack alternatives. Kim's offer to sit down with Trump may or may not indicate openness to a deal. More certain is that it demonstrates that North Korea does in fact respond to pressure and thus can be deterred. This, more than the summit itself, offers hope for stability in Northeast Asia.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. ❖

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