

As the shaky US-North Korea summit is set to begin, the parties must search for common interest

Written by Benjamin Habib, Lecturer in International Relations, Department of Politics and Philosophy, La Trobe University

US President Donald Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un will meet on Tuesday for their highly anticipated summit in Singapore. For the summit to be productive, the negotiations need to converge on a lowest-common-denominator shared interest that both parties can agree on.

We saw this in the inter-Korean summit, where South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un settled on easy-win confidence-building measures as the [starting point](#) for more substantive negotiations.

Read more: [Summit on, then off, now on again? The seemingly endless game-playing of US-North Korea relations](#)

Given the [extreme and long-standing trust deficit](#) between the US and DPRK, it is not clear where Trump and Kim might find this lowest common denominator to unlock a confidence-building pathway. Because of that, this summit is shaping as compelling viewing as a spectacle, and perplexing in its ambiguous purpose.

What do they have to offer each other?

North Korea is not committed to denuclearisation as the concept has been understood by the Trump administration. The North Korean interpretation of a nuclear-free Korea implies the full simultaneous nuclear weapons relinquishment by all nuclear powers, including the United States.

Here, North Korea can [speak the language of denuclearisation](#) without ever having to commit to “complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation” (CVID).

The problem with Trump’s insistence on CVID is that there is no mutually agreeable starting

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point for a discussion with North Korea on those terms. There is [no outcome](#) in which the regime willingly relinquishes its nuclear weapons program, because the Kim regime is so heavily invested in nuclear weapons as the foundation of its security strategy, economic development pathway, and domestic political legitimacy.

The only real concession of value that Washington has to offer Kim is a formal treaty to conclude the Korean War. Indeed, Trump has [hinted that the "signing of a document"](#) to close hostilities is a possibility (though he stopped short of offering a formal peace treaty).

What does North Korea have to offer the United States, short of denuclearisation? We have seen gestures of goodwill in the lead-up to the summit. North Korea's recently [demolished tunnels](#) at its Punggye-ri nuclear test site are a gesture of goodwill to Washington, offering up a now-obsolete facility.

This echoes a similar concession by Pyongyang in 2008, when it [demolished the cooling tower](#) of the obsolete reactor at Yongbyon. Negotiations may settle on a nuclear freeze and/or missile testing moratorium, in addition to other smaller security-related confidence-building measures.

The North [released three American citizens](#) to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on a recent visit to Pyongyang. The Americans had been detained in the DPRK on accusations of espionage.

And in a test of [Thomas Friedman's tongue-in-cheek theory](#) that no two countries with McDonald's restaurants would ever go to war, Kim may even [offer to have a McDonald's](#) open a restaurant in Pyongyang.

Kim may also court Trump with flattery, as [many other world leaders have done](#) to productive effect.

Who has the negotiating leverage?

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Both parties have strengths and weaknesses in their bargaining positions. North Korea has (or is close enough to) a deployable nuclear weapons capability. Kim appears enthusiastic to talk now with the Americans, because in nuclear weapons his government has the strategic leverage it needs. North Korea wants to negotiate a peace agreement with the United States, but on Pyongyang's terms.

Read more: [*Five assumptions we make about North Korea – and why they're wrong*](#)

While it is highly unlikely that Kim begged Trump to reconvene the summit “[on hands and knees](#),” as Rudy Giuliani has suggested, North Korea does have some incentive to make concessions.

Kim's ambitions of developing the North Korean economy under the [Byungjin](#) model are constrained by the UN Security Council and bilateral American sanctions regimes.

While North Korea has [demonstrated an ability to persevere in spite of sanctions](#), and even grow some niche sectors of its economy (such as the mining sector), Kim's vision for economic development ultimately requires strategic connections with international development partners.

The explicit inclusion of references to transportation infrastructure linkages with South Korea in the [Panmunjom Declaration](#) from April's inter-Korean summit illustrates this point.

Similarly, there are limitations on American action that [constrain its negotiating options](#) – most notably, the strategic vulnerability of Seoul to North Korean bombardment.

The absence of a substantive relationship between the US and North Korea also limits Washington's economic and diplomatic leverage. Rightly or wrongly, the US has [dealt itself](#)

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[out of direct influence](#)

over North Korea through its various policies of strategic isolation and maximum pressure. It is ironic that US officials have consistently urged China to do more to pressure North Korea and uphold the integrity of the sanctions regime, when it has been economic interactions between the DPRK and China that have had the most demonstrable impact on politics in Pyongyang.

However, the clear power disparity between the US and DPRK is often overlooked. As the more powerful party with overwhelming nuclear superiority and clear capacity to deter any North Korean nuclear threat, the US does have capacity to reset the terms of the relationship by reducing the heat in negotiations.

Trump can do this by changing the focus of the negotiations. If it [insists on CVID to the bitter end](#), the Trump administration will blow an opportunity to meaningfully change the strategic goalposts on the Korean Peninsula by focusing on the wrong prize.

Who else is playing a role?

With such ambiguity over potential outcomes from the summit, other regional players are lobbying hard around the edges to represent their interests.

South Korea's diplomatic efforts in 2018 have been geared to guiding the US into a more conciliatory position with North Korea. This would make it politically safer for Trump to negotiate for an agreement with Pyongyang, knowing there are influential American officials in Trump's ear counselling for war.

Moon Jae-in has been [busy maintaining the diplomatic momentum](#) generated by the inter-Korean summit, from his tactical ego-stroking comments about Trump deserving the Nobel Peace Prize to visiting Washington to lobby the president directly.

Moon has even flagged that he may [travel to Singapore](#) for the summit, knowing South Korea is best positioned to facilitate confidence-building with the DPRK.

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Conversely, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has also been engaging in shuttle diplomacy, urging Trump to follow a tougher line. North Korea's WMD and missile threat to Japan, and resolution of the abductee issue, are [core interests](#) of the Abe administration.

Indeed, an adversarial North Korea better suits Abe's domestic agenda for Japanese strategic "normalisation", which would be undercut by rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang.

It is also interesting to see that former NBA star Dennis Rodman may be an attendee at the summit. While Rodman has been lampooned in some quarters for his sports diplomacy and relationship with Kim Jong-un, he nonetheless has a [level of access to and a unique rapport](#) with the North Korean leader that is largely unmatched by anyone else within the American foreign policy establishment.

As an ["ambassador of goodwill"](#), Rodman could help the parties find that common interest.

Read more: [*If a US-North Korea summit does happen, we'll have Moon Jae-in to thank for it*](#)

Also significant is the non-invitation of US National Security Advisor John Bolton. His [recent comments](#) comparing North Korea to Libya appear to be a [deliberate attempt to undercut](#) the State Department's groundwork with Pyongyang over the past few months.

American hawks such as Bolton view any kind of engagement with North Korea as a "loss" or ["appeasement"](#) — one of the most juvenile and misapplied terms in the international relations lexicon.

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They are well aware of the difficulty of getting any negotiated deal ratified in a Republican-majority Congress (recalling the fate of the [Agreed Framework](#)). The irony is a deal is more likely to stick in the US if it is owned by a Republican president.

What could this summit achieve?

My view is that North Korea can be deterred as a nuclear power, and a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War represents the best pathway to managing regional security and ensuring the [safety of the people who live in the region](#).

It is under the umbrella of a formalised peace regime that human rights concerns within North Korea are more likely to be addressed, coupled with [continued pressure](#) from international human rights advocates.

Engagement and interaction is the best vehicle for this, based on an [understanding of inter-relationships of complex material, financial and ecological flows and networks](#) that are shaping [social change processes](#) within the DPRK.

Summits are symbols that act as markers in a much broader process of relationship-building. They are based on confidence-building measures and clear, achievable implementation steps. Through such a process, the parties could gradually evolve the level of trust necessary to progress to subsequent steps on the negotiation pathway.

It is unclear in the build-up to this unprecedented summit if the participants will be able to hack away the thicket of decades of mistrust and hostility to identify common interests.

We will find out on Tuesday if Trump and Kim can find that lowest common denominator on which to build a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Benjamin Habib does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company

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