

US-North Korea Nuclear Summit: Assessing China's Exclusion Anxiety

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When the news broke on late March 8 that President Trump agreed to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, the whole world was taken by surprise. There is no indication that China had been informed in advance of either Kim's dramatic invitation or Trump's even-more-dramatic acceptance of the invitation. Although it remains unclear whether, when, where or how the Summit will eventually transpire, China's role, or the lack thereof, will be an important factor for the future development on the Korean peninsula.

Right after the potential Summit was announced, there have been two rather different attitudes emerging in China regarding what will be the first ever Summit between the top leaders of the United States and North Korea. On the unofficial level, especially among the Chinese policy wonks, a sense of exclusion anxiety was clearly erupting. The following photoshop-ed picture was applauded in China as accurately reflecting how China views the perception of China and its roles by Trump and Kim Jong Un: "Finally, no middleman to take a cut."



终于，没有中间商赚差价。



In a similarly sarcastic joke, some Chinese experts lamented: “We only wanted them (US and North Korea) to have a talk. Who’d know that they went ahead and got a room?” A [commentary](#) by Professor Zheng Yongnian went viral online. It argues that a US-DPRK summit will very likely happen at the expense of China’s strategic interests. Professor Zheng’s argument is that sacrificing China is a key leverage North Korea will use when making deals with the US to gain Washington’s trust and concessions. These initial reactions reflect China’s inner fear and anxiety about being marginalized and its interests being sacrificed in the US-NK bilateral negotiations.

In contrast, at the official level, China’s reaction appears to be much more positive. In President Xi Jinping’s phone conversation with President Trump two days later, he hoped that [“US and North Korea will initiate their engagement and dialogue as early as possible and strive for a positive result.”](#) Following the same theme, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [“welcomes the positive messages US and North Korea released about their direct dialogue”](#) and [“fully supports the dedication by related parties to solve problems through dialogues and negotiations”](#). The official positions appear counterintuitive in that they support a US-North Korea bilateral approach to solve the nuclear crisis, which as it currently stands does not include a role for China.

How to understand and assess the origins and level of China’s exclusion anxiety in a US-North Korea bilateral dialogue is extremely important in determining China’s future calculations and strategies in relation to the denuclearization issue and the prospects for the unification of the Korean peninsula. An examination of China’s cost-benefit analysis since the beginning of the Trump Administration reveals that China sees key benefits for China in the de-escalation of tension. More importantly, China is skeptical about the US and North Korea reaching a speedy and successful resolution in the forthcoming Summit. In the light of this skepticism China appears confident that its total exclusion from the process is unlikely to happen.

Swinging between War Anxiety and Exclusion Anxiety

For a long time, China's bottom line on the North Korea nuclear crisis has swung between two anxieties. At the one extreme is war anxiety- China is strongly averse to an armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Reasons for this fear are abundant, including but not limited to refugee inflows, humanitarian disasters, China being drawn into the conflict and the negative consequences of potential unification. China is also afraid of the use of nuclear weapons right on the Chinese border. Although the strategic utility of North Korea for China as a buffer state has long since been overwhelmed by the liability China has to carry for Pyongyang's provocative behavior, Beijing nevertheless treats North Korea as leverage in bilateral negotiations with Washington, a leverage that will be erased if North Korea ceases to exist. All in all, Chinese war anxiety is so severe that ["no war and no chaos" is a clear redline for Chinese President Xi.](#)

With the Trump Administration's vigorous war preparation and its incessant rhetoric on "preemptive strike," "preventative strike," as well as a "bloody nose," Chinese anxiety about an upcoming war between the US and North Korea has been elevated significantly since the inauguration of the Trump Administration. At several junctures throughout 2017, especially after North Korea detailed its plan to attack Guam in August and its successful test of the Hwasong-15 missile in December, the Chinese policy community was particularly stressed and fearful of the imminence of a military conflict between the US and North Korea. China's war anxiety was so severe that it began to [implement local contingency plans along the border](#) and [started discussing contingencies with the US](#), a conversation that Beijing consistently refused to have in the past.

On the other side of the spectrum lies China's exclusion anxiety, a deeply embedded concern that North Korea and the US might engage in secret dialogues without China's knowledge and reach agreement at the expense of China's national interests. Most importantly, China is concerned with any China-related concessions that North Korea might make toward the US in exchange for a US security guarantee, or any ill-contemplated settlement that could lead to the unification of the Korean peninsula by absorption and the emergence of a unified Korea as an American military ally on China's border.

Sino-North Korea relations have deteriorated significantly since the ascension of Xi Jinping in 2013. The rift and underlying hostility between the two countries and the two leaders enhances China's anxiety and sense of uncertainty about North Korean motives and plans. Although China would like to assume that North Korea's fundamental logic on the nuclear program- its insecurity from a hostile US- remains unchanged, the Chinese find it difficult not to challenge assumed North Korean alignment choices given the deterioration of Sino-DPRK relations and China's cooperation with the US on sanctioning Pyongyang. Some North Korea experts in China argue that North Korea's ultimate goal is to normalize relations with the United States and become America's partner. Given the opportunity, therefore, the logic is that North Korea will not hesitate to abandon China and use China as leverage to get a better deal from the US. "Defecting to the enemy with nuclear weapons" is the popular term used in China to describe such a scenario. As an example, the following picture was widely circulated in China a few years ago, reflecting the Chinese sentiment toward a potential US-DPRK rapprochement.



An overview of Beijing's position on the North Korea nuclear crisis in recent years reveals a pattern of swinging between these two anxieties. When tension and potential conflict increase, China's war anxiety becomes the key determining factor and de-escalation and promotion of direct engagement between Washington and Pyongyang is China's top priority. When the possibility of direct US-DPRK talks increases, especially through backchannels and without China's knowledge, Beijing exclusion anxiety rises consequently and its concern about war temporarily became less acute.

China's Calculation on Bilateral Talks

Trump's policy has been a main driving force of China's North Korea policy since 2017. From the beginning of his administration, President Trump pinpointed North Korea and trade as his top priorities on China. While China enjoys the attention and the policy leverage it had gained from it, the insatiable demands from the US for more concessions and the escalation of tension have not been good news for Beijing.

From the Chinese perspective, direct US and North Korean talks are expedient, convenient and spare China from Washington's push to deliver more. It also protects China from threats of secondary sanctions when Beijing refuses to comply with America's wishes. To minimize China's responsibility, China has been keen to identify US security threats as the fundamental reason for North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship. The logical consequence of this is that only a direct dialogue between US and North Korea can address Pyongyang's insecurity. Since China is not the source of North Korea's grievance and cannot provide North Korea with the security it seeks, Beijing argues that Washington is the only player that can address the root cause of North Korea's nuclear ambition.

The problem with this logic, as many in China have criticized, is that it defines China as an indirect and secondary player in the North Korea nuclear issue. By denying that China carries any direct responsibility for the creation of the problem, it morally and practically excuses China from having to take ownership of a solution. The side effect is that it also removes China from any central leadership role in that solution, which may have a critical impact on China's security environment and

national interests. To some, the self-denial of a central role equates to China willingly surrendering control of the situation to Washington and Pyongyang, whose preferences and decisions are quite likely to be against China's interests. The counter-argument since the last round of Six Party Talks in 2007 is that China can neither control North Korea nor America, so a driver's seat in relation to stalemate (or even crossfire) is not only costly, but also unwise.

The bilateral dialogues that China officially supports will hopefully initiate a longer process of nuclear and political negotiations. In terms of economic considerations, China knows that the US is unlikely to be the sole provider of the economic incentives so essential to any deal between North Korea and the US. China also believes that any arrangement to replace the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement will have to be approved and accepted by all the original signatories therefore China enjoys a special status in that process.

Exclusion Anxiety: What is China Afraid of?

In the discussions, there are primarily four things listed as potential results from a DPRK-US Summit which directly impact China's national interests. The first is the marginalization of China's role in not only the nuclear issue but also the status quo on the Korean peninsula. If the US and North Korea circumvent China in their direct negotiations, China will lose its say and ability to influence the summit agenda, content and result. Foreseeably, if both the US and North Korea see no obligation to include China, cutting China out as the middle man will remove some of China's self-serving demands. For example, China's strong aversion to the continuation of US military deployment on the Korean peninsula could potentially hinder the prospect of a deal if North Korea finds such deployment acceptable.

The second fear is whether North Korea will leverage and sell China out in order to get a deal with the US. If North Korea's most important agenda is to normalize relations with the US and to gain US acceptance of its domestic system, this will open doors to Pyongyang's normalization of ties with the international community. China, cannot offer North Korea those opportunities. For China, however, there is no guarantee that North Korea will not offer itself as a bargaining chip to the US to counterbalance China since it, rather than North Korea, is the most important and serious long-term threat to the US globally.

The third fear is that the unification of the Korean peninsula will be expedited at the Summit. If North Korea can improve relations with the United States and reach an agreement over the future of the US-Korea alliance, it could arguably remove a major obstacle to unification. If the US finds a nuclear, pro-US Korea acceptable, South Korea might even be supportive of unification to create a unified, nuclear-capable Korea. This will result in the creation of a much stronger Korean nation that combines South Korea's economic power and North Korea's nuclear/military power. In that scenario, China's security environment in northeast Asia will deteriorate due to the emergence of another nuclear state that is not necessarily China-friendly. Compared to the current stalemate and tension, China would like to see an independent, neutral, nuclear-free unified Korea. However, that probably will not happen if unification is expedited prematurely.

Last but not least, if the US chooses to coexist with a nuclear North Korea without formally recognizing it as a nuclear power this will challenge a major platform of China's East Asian foreign policy. In China's official policy formula, denuclearization is one of three goals in relation to North Korea. Depending on how negotiations proceed, the situation could evolve into a stalemate where a nuclearized North Korea (non-provocative and non-proliferating) is allowed to exist. China will not hold

it as a deal breaker if the US decides to throw the game. However, that will have implications for the non-proliferation regime and potential nuclear arms race in northeast Asia.

With or without Chinese participation, a deal between the US and North Korea will deprive China of North Korea as policy leverage in its relations with the US. The political, economic and strategic consequences of such a deal may not be completely damaging to China's interests, but many of them could. More importantly, all these consequences remain open possibilities, meaning the uncertainty is tremendous. Therefore, for China to be excluded from the substantive negotiations, unnerving and unsettling.

Factors for Confidence?

While these are current concerns, they do not explain the welcoming attitude from President Xi and the Chinese government toward the Summit between US and North Korea. Perhaps the most important factor in that decision was the attitude and preferences of President Xi Jinping himself. What remains unclear is why Xi adopted that position. Popular speculation is that Xi wants the North Korea issue to become a sterling example of US-China cooperation and a concrete showcase of the feasibility and desirability of his proposed "new model of major power relations". Since President Xi, in his phone call with President Trump, encouraged the US and North Korea to proceed with the Summit, it would be highly unwise for any Chinese government agency to sing a different song.

Nevertheless, looking more deeply into China's assessment of the potential result of the Summit, no one is sanguine about the summit leading to North Korean denuclearization. Both countries have engaged in similar negotiations before and the North Korean commitment to denuclearization as conveyed by South Korea is not fundamentally different from its previous position, which imposes conditions that the US needs to fulfill before denuclearization will take place. North Korea as a nuclear-armed state was written into the DPRK Constitution in 2012. The precedent of Gaddafi's brutal death does not offer much confidence to the North Korean leader about a safe exit. On the US side Washington will be under serious political pressure to push for comprehensive, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization. Settling for anything less than that is dangerous and politically costly. In other words, if North Korea's commitment to denuclearization is bogus and the US bottom line on denuclearization is genuine, their conflict is irreconcilable, and a deal is essentially an illusion. Even if the Summit takes place between Trump and Kim Jong Un, it doesn't equate to a deal. The real negotiation therefore could take years and face potential setbacks as the world saw during the Six Party Talks.

The second reason for pessimism lies in the nature of the North Korean regime. The top priority of North Korea, in the view of many Chinese, is regime security and the survival of Kim family rule. On the other hand, President Trump has demonstrated a strong interest in the human rights abuses and the brutality of the North Korea government. Not only did he honor a North Korean defector in his State of the Union address in January 2018, he also invited a group of North Korean defectors to the White House to raise the profile of the issue. It is foreseeable that in the event of North Korea opening up, an inflow of foreign information and influence will rapidly erode the foundation of the North Korean dictatorship, paving the foundation for the demise of the North Korean regime. It will take China some convincing that Kim Jong Un will allow that to happen. Following the same logic, even if North and South Koreans begin conversations about their unification, the drastically different natures of their political systems will hinder any substantive progress as long as Kim's family strives to maintain its dictatorship.

The third factor reinforcing China's indispensable role originates from Chinese geopolitics. In the Chinese view, the Korean peninsula will always be located on the Chinese border and no country in the region can defy China's economic power and political influence. Even in the case of a US-North Korea rapprochement, North Korea will still be on China's periphery and subject to many realistic constraints, including Chinese hegemonic power. Chinese influence over South Korea, as demonstrated through its economic sanctions following Seoul's decision to deploy THAAD system attests to the level of influence China could wage on the Korean peninsula. Although China was not successful in deterring THAAD deployment, it claimed victory in that South Korea was warned and put on notice of the consequences of antagonizing China. In this sense, North Korea might someday wish to align more closely with the US if conditions allow. However, it still needs to consider the direct and indirect damage China could inflict on its national interests.

Given the lack of trust between US and North Korea, and the unlikelihood of either North Korea or the US abandoning their agendas related to the North Korean regime the situation is problematic. Given China's role as a signatory of the Armistice and a long-time mediator in the North Korea nuclear crisis, China is confident that the US and North Korea will not be able to reach a deal in the foreseeable future without Chinese participation. Such a role could include China as an external guarantor for a potential peace mechanism, or as a key provider of economic and energy assistance to North Korea.

Where China Stands Now

Despite widespread anxiety about China being excluded from the Summit among the Chinese public and policy wonks, the Chinese government and officials are relatively complacent. China takes credit for the Summit and for the de-escalation of tension. It believes that China played an integral role in getting North Korea to the table both by limiting North Korea's breathing space through sanctions and by proposing alternative routes—"freeze for freeze" and the "dual track mechanism." From the Chinese perspective, without Chinese cooperation, Trump and Kim Jong Un would not have come to this point. This perception seems to be validated by [President Trump's acknowledgement and gratitude](#) for the role China has played, a message that South Korea [warmly echoed](#) as well.

There are reasons for the Chinese government to welcome and support the Summit decision. The Summit almost immediately eased China's anxiety over a potential war. It mitigated US pressure on China to deliver more on North Korea at the UN Security Council, such as an oil embargo or the interdiction of North Korean ships. For the time being, the US threat of secondary sanctions on Chinese oil companies and state-owned banks for their transactions with North Korea has become a non-issue. More importantly, President Xi can claim North Korea as a sterling example of US-China cooperation. Even if President Trump does not let the North Korea case interfere with him being tough on trade issues with China, President Xi probably would like to maintain the positive course of the bilateral relations.

The exclusion anxiety, however, is still rampant in the Chinese policy community. It does not like being sidelined or given a marginal role in negotiations. China, however, sees a long and difficult journey between the Summit and the solution of the North Korea nuclear issue. The agreement to have the Summit and North Korea's ostensible agreement to denuclearize does not change the fundamental issues nor conflicts of national interests in the region. Therefore, China sees many opportunities to exert influence. China will seek all possible channels to maintain its influence and enhance its role in the negotiations and related processes. Given the geography, history and current political realities, any long-term, complete exclusion of China will be difficult.

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