

Who's Afraid of Talking With Kim Jong Un?

Americans should welcome President Trump's apparent willingness to speak with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, but instead naysayers are warning of dire consequences, Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

Three months ago, I quoted approvingly Donald Trump's campaign pledge to supporters in Atlanta that he would "absolutely" speak to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un even if there were only a "10 percent or a 20 percent chance that I can talk him out of those damn nukes."

"What the hell is wrong with speaking?" the candidate said. "We should be eating a hamburger on a conference table."

This week, the ever-mercurial President Trump agreed to take Kim up on a surprise offer to meet face-to-face in two months to search for peace. The meeting will be the first ever held between the leaders of the United States and North Korea, two countries that remain technically at war.

Whether the two men agree to eat hamburgers or kimchi, Americans should applaud Trump's renewed willingness to talk rather than fight. Instead, all manner of naysayers are warning of potentially dire consequences. A few of their points have merit, but none outweigh the likely consequences of doing nothing to stop an impending war.

For the past year, the two leaders have communicated only by trading epithets like "Little Rocket Man" and "lunatic mean old trickster and human reject." Such exchanges would be entertaining if President Trump had not also threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea and bring down "fire and fury like the world has never seen." While Pyongyang has tested new warheads and missiles, Washington has been conducting war exercises and moving nuclear-capable stealth bombers and submarines within range of North Korea.

The Unacceptable Risk of War

In recent months, experts have put the odds of a catastrophic war—which would likely kill hundreds of thousands of Americans in addition to countless Koreans and Japanese—at between 25 and 50 percent. President Trump's foreign-policy adviser, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, said the likelihood of Trump launching a preemptive war will rise to 70 percent if North Korea

conducts another nuclear test. "At the pace we're on, it's just a matter of time," he added.

Yet instead of hailing the prospect of talks as a great win for the life expectancy of people on both sides of the Pacific, some analysts insist on treating Kim's proposal as a zero sum game.

"By some assessments, this is really a victory for Kim, who for years has sought proof of his status and North Korea's power by dangling the offer of leader-to-leader talks with the United States," writes Karen DeYoung, senior national security correspondent for the Washington Post.

And liberal New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, while claiming that he is "all for negotiations," focuses on his "fear" that Trump "has given North Korea what it has long craved: the respect and legitimacy that comes from the North Korean leader standing as an equal beside the American president."

Does Kristof really think peace will be easier to achieve by disrespecting Kim and insisting on his illegitimacy? Deep down, does Kristof care more about one-upmanship than preventing nuclear war?

Will Trump Flub the Deal?

Many critics also warn that North Korea will take advantage of Trump's ignorance and lack of preparation to gain some unspecified advantage.

"President Trump's infamous penchant for going off script and his admiration of authoritarian types could weaken our negotiating position," declared Suzanne DiMaggio of the Washington-based New America Foundation, who helped arrange backdoor diplomatic contacts between the two countries last year.

Zack Beauchamp, a news analyst for Vox.com, warns that Trump is "very easy to manipulate" and "easily swayed by flattery," weaknesses that make it "easy to imagine the North Koreans tricking Trump into a deal that, in the long term, helps their strategic position while hurting America's."

Not to be outdone, senior White House and national security reporters for CNN caution, "there's a real chance Trump could be walking into a massive trap."

Critics are right that Trump knows almost nothing about Korea. ("It's not so easy," he conceded last year, after talking with Chinese President Xi.) Trump has yet to appoint an ambassador to South Korea. The president doesn't bother to talk with his Secretary of State, who said only hours before the White House announcement, "We're a long way from negotiations." And persistent reports suggest that Trump's national security adviser, H. R. McMaster, is on his way

out-bad timing, if true.

But what is Trump likely to bargain away out of ignorance or vanity? Perhaps, critics fear, he will relax sanctions, agree to scale back military exercises with South Korea, or start exploring a long-term peace deal with North Korea before first nailing down iron-clad guarantees of North Korean nuclear disarmament.

But none of those measures would put the security of South Korea, much less the United States, at risk. No one seriously believes North Korea can win a conventional war. And its small arsenal of nuclear warheads is useful only for deterring a preemptive U.S. attack. Any other use would invite the total annihilation of North Korea.

The Danger of Overconfidence

One legitimate worry is that an unprepared Trump may engage in talks with false expectations of a quick PR victory, overconfident that economic sanctions have forced North Korea to the table.

“If Trump goes . . . and expects to announce a denuclearized North Korea, he will leave disappointed and maybe angry enough to believe that talks are useless and only military options are left,” says Vipin Narang, associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Trump needs to understand that Kim sees nuclear weapons as essential to his regime’s security. Dismantling his arsenal and opening up his country to intrusive inspections in order to ease sanctions would simply make his regime prey to a resumption of sanctions at a later date—without the benefit of a credible deterrent.

Kim will disarm, if ever, only after years of confidence-building, bolstered by guarantees from other powers, and after Washington signs a permanent peace treaty. The same conditions will doubtless be required before North Korea significantly liberalizes human rights.

Trump should go into the talks with the more modest but absolutely vital aim of heading off an impending war. Realistic near-term goals include freezing further missile and warhead testing by North Korea and eliciting guarantees against proliferation of North Korea’s technology to other countries.

To achieve those ends, he may need—in consultation with Seoul—to restrain U.S.-South Korean war exercises and partially relax sanctions. He and Kim should also map out a reasonable timetable for negotiating a final peace settlement between our countries. But Trump should refuse to let critics at home dissuade him from

seeking an alternative to war.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international relations and history. His articles on Korea include "No Time for Complacency over Korea War Threat," "America Isn't on the Brink of Nuclear War-It Just Looks That Way," "What's Wrong with Talking to North Korea?," "Trump's North Korea Delusions," "The New Trump: War President," "Hurtling Toward Fire and Fury," "Risk to US from War on North Korea," "North Korea Fears 'Regime Change' Strike," "The Negotiation Option With North Korea," and "Behind the North Korean Nuke Crisis."
