



THE PENINSULA

Is North Korea the Next Target of Trump's Search for a Deal?

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The strange scene of U.S. President Donald Trump huddled knee to knee with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the anteroom of Pope Francis' funeral has prompted hopes that a so-far-elusive peace deal in the war between Russia and Ukraine is within reach.

Whether that comes to pass remains to be seen. But one product of the exchange is renewed speculation that Trump may soon turn his eyes toward another long-sought deal—a “peace” pact with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Axios reported on [April 27](#) that senior Trump officials are actively consulting experts inside and outside the administration about the prospects of reviving talks, picking up the threads of the first Trump administration's attempts. At least one prominent expert on the North Korean nuclear program confirmed that he had been recently contacted about a potential meeting between Trump and Kim.

“While nothing appears imminent, Trump has made clear he'd like to reconnect with Kim—perhaps face-to-face—and his national security team is preparing for that scenario,” Axios reported.

Informed diplomatic sources in Seoul believe that this process is “at a very early stage.” At this point, “Washington is gearing up to do a policy review and generate some options for North Korea,” a senior diplomat told this writer.

Wi Sung-lac, a former senior official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and advisor to leading presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung, echoed these sentiments. "If Ukraine stabilizes, the next turn for Trump will be North Korea, seeking a resumption of talks," he predicted.

For North Korea, the main incentive to resume talks will be to gain U.S. acceptance of their status as a nuclear weapons state, says Professor Andrei Lankov of Kookmin University, a respected analyst of North Korea based in South Korea. There is no interest in Pyongyang for any meeting aimed at the country's denuclearization, Lankov says—an assessment shared by many U.S. experts, according to the Axios report.

The prospects for a deal that leaves North Korea's nuclear capability largely intact could be improved by U.S. negotiations with Iran that re-establish the more limited goals of the agreement reached previously under the Barack Obama administration but was dismantled by Trump. A new agreement with Iran that simply limits its enrichment of uranium could signal that Trump is ready to accept far more limited goals in his deal-making.

After contributing to Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, a triumphant North Korean regime may try to use the moment to its advantage. "They will try to talk to Trump," Lankov, who was trained in the Soviet Union, said. "They are not eager, but they will do it."

A victorious Vladimir Putin may even welcome and encourage this meeting, argued Moon Chung-in, a well-known progressive foreign policy thinker. "Putin can play a very important facilitation role with North Korea and encourage Kim to talk to Trump," Moon told this writer recently. "Russia has been more vocal about accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state" relative to China, he said.

There is even the possibility of a trilateral meeting, according to Tae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat who defected in 2016 and is now an elected official in South Korea. "If Putin ends the war and wants to raise the status of Kim Jong Un, then a trilateral summit could be possible," Tae, who now heads the presidential advisory commission on unification, told the writer in Seoul.

Western diplomats agree this is possible but regard it as unrealistic at this point.

How much does North Korea want a deal?

Trump's desire to resume his quest for a grand deal with Kim is evident from his frequent references to his friendship with the North Korean dictator. But many analysts, including this writer, have questioned whether Kim is still interested in returning to what was clearly a painful failure in his bid for legitimacy and global status.

The last time around, Kim felt considerable pressure from an isolated and failing economy facing international sanctions supported by China and Russia. But those sanctions are now effectively broken, and the North Korean economy is trending upward, according to the Bank of Korea.

Chinese pipelines to North Korea pump in oil and other key imports, reports Lankov, and the Russians are supplying energy, fertilizer, and foodstuffs, as well as other key inputs, in exchange for arms and soldiers supplied to the war effort. In addition, North Korea regularly mounts highly successful cyber theft operations that yield billions of dollars in cash and cryptocurrency.

The North Korean regime still faces severe internal challenges, observes former defector Tae. The younger generation is infected by the spread of ideas and culture from South Korea, though the regime has increased its repression of any signs of that spread. "That tells me that Kim Jong Un is still very afraid of any possible contingency," he says.

Still, argues Lankov, "they are more secure now than ever since the famines of the 1990s."

"The elimination of sanctions is still part of their negotiation goals," says a close observer of the North Korean economy based in Seoul. "But it is not so critical compared to previous times."

For now, the North Korean regime may be comfortable with the status quo, the well-informed Western diplomat says. "I just don't think Kim Jong Un is in a cooperative mood with Washington."

The South Korean role

One factor potentially affecting the prospects for a Trump-Kim negotiation is the role of South Korea. During the first Trump administration, the progressive government of President Moon Jae-in played a significant role in facilitating those talks. The conservative government of President Yoon Suk Yeol was opposed to that outreach and took a much tougher stance on the resumption of any dialogue with Pyongyang.

The presidential election in early June, however, could bring a return to progressive rule in South Korea. While a new government may not have the same channels to the North, it will likely not stand in the way of a resumption of engagement, experts in Seoul say.

"We want a restoration of South-North relations and we are not critical of U.S.-North Korea talks," says former South Korean diplomat Cho Hyun, a close advisor to the progressive leadership of the Democratic Party. "We believe it will be helpful in getting peace on the peninsula."

Cho admits that a new South Korean government may not be invited as a key player in any talks between Trump and Kim but hopes that it will have a place at the table. "I don't think we will be brushed aside," the former senior Foreign Ministry official told this writer.

What happens next may depend on how events elsewhere, from Ukraine to Iran, unfold in the coming weeks.

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Photo from [The State Department](#).

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