



**Coming Back Into the Fold?
The Motivations Behind the Kim-Xi Meeting
and Implications for ‘Denuclearization’ on the Korean Peninsula**
by Adam MacDonald

Kim Jong-Un’s (KJU) [secretive and ‘unofficial’ visit](#) to China recently marks both his first foreign trip since he became Supreme Leader of North Korea and his first meeting with a Head State in Chinese President Xi Jinping. The visit came as a surprise to many observers as China has been noticeably absent from the flurry of activity over the past few months in preparation for summits between KJU and his South Korean counterpart, President Moon Jae-in, in [late April](#) and US President Donald Trump [scheduled](#) for May. Despite [the strained relations](#) between the two, the Kim-Xi meeting – [at ‘Beijing’s invitation’](#) – signals both China’s interest in remaining a critical player in any changes to the military and political situation on the Korean Peninsula and its continued pull over North Korea given they are Pyongyang’s largest economic and diplomatic partner.

The meeting, though, should not be understood simply as China finally reigning in its insubordinate neighbour. KJU is acting in part from a position of strength, secure in his grip on power and in possession of a burgeoning nuclear and missile force which, while generating increasingly severe sanctions, has ushered in concentrated efforts from the international community to establish diplomatic channels at the highest levels to ease tensions. In this vein, China’s move to secure the first meeting with KJU legitimizes and demonstrates North Korea’s strategy of being the [‘belle of the ball’](#) of Northeast Asia with various states manoeuvring to have their own bilateral summitry with the reclusive and unknown leader. At its core the Kim-Xi meeting is not based on the re-establishment of a master-pupil relationship between Communist brethren and previous wartime allies but rather due to an overlapping interest associated with furthering efforts towards the ‘denuclearization’ of the Korean Peninsula, namely the reduction of American power and influence in the region.

Righting a Rocky Relationship?

Relations between North Korea and China have been increasingly [estranged](#) for several reasons since KJU assumed power. First, KJU’s purge of the military and Communist Party leadership in order to solidify power resulted in the execution of a number of his father’s most trusted advisors, including his uncle [Jang Song-thaek](#), who had close relations with China. These purges were interpreted by Beijing as a move by the young leader to distance himself from this relationship. Second, North Korea’s nuclear ambitions have weakened China’s interests and influence in the region by illuminating its inability or unwillingness to reign in its dependent neighbour’s [hostile rhetoric](#) and [actions](#) as well as legitimizing continued American regional leadership and deployment of large combat forces in support of bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan. As well, a number of North Korea nuclear and missile tests in 2016 and 2017 were conducted during Beijing’s hosting of a number of important international summits, including [the G20](#) and [BRICS](#), questioning whether these were coincidental or deliberate in demonstrating KJU’s independence from China.

As a result, China has become largely supportive of additional [sanctions](#) against North Korea (though their enforcement of these is [questionable](#)), including [most recently](#) strict limitations on fuel exports and employment of North Korea workers abroad. Given its geographic proximity and possession

of nuclear weaponry, though, North Korea is a necessary partner for China which wants to ensure stability on the Korean Peninsula to prevent the devastating consequences of any sort of conflict. China, however, has been clear it will not defend Pyongyang if it initiates hostilities and is already planning for [worst-case scenario contingencies](#) in the event of the collapse of the North Korea regime, including the deployment of forces to secure nuclear and missile sites which are largely in relatively close proximity to the Chinese border.

China [opposes](#) a nuclear-armed North Korea (and is realizing the constraining effects their possession in the hands of smaller states has on larger powers attempting to influence/coerce them) and supports reducing tensions while working towards the ultimate goal of denuclearization. China's hosting of KJU is in line with its long-held position of a peaceful and negotiated process vice allowing Washington and its regional allies to dictate the terms of the international community's response, and ultimately risk Beijing being sidelined. Though relations have been strained and distant, China has never really abandoned North Korea completely. North Korea continues to be an important buffer state inhibiting the unification of Korea as a strong, American ally. While in part based on the motivation not to exact or facilitate too much economic and military pressure to result in the [collapse of the regime](#), China has been frustrated by its inability to influence Pyongyang and curtail the excesses of its nuclear bellicosity. An opportunity, however, now exists for Beijing to attempt to re-cast relations under its terms, specifically with respect to lobbying the international community for reductions in economic sanctions in exchange for nuclear restraint on the part of North Korea. This opportunity, though, is not of China's own making but rather has been opened by and large by KJU himself.

It is unclear the exact motivation(s) behind KJU's sudden shift to a more conciliatory and diplomatic approach this year. The cumulative effects of a series of sanctions imposed on North Korea throughout 2017 may be a contributing factor, but it is far from clear they were the most important or only rationale. In his [New Year's address](#), KJU declared his nuclear and missile programs were completed and now was willing to work towards reducing regional tensions, specifically with South Korea. Even in possession of a [rudimentary nuclear force](#), KJU may feel confident in negotiating with world leaders, especially after [demonstrating](#) an inter-continental ballistic missile capability that can reach the continental US. Such a strategy of engagement is in support of KJU's ['byungjin' policy](#) of the simultaneous pursuit of a credible nuclear force alongside progressing economic development. The hostile rhetoric and provocative tests over the past year, furthermore, may have been driven largely by a desire to deter any predilections of preventative strikes during this vulnerable stage in the development of a weaponized nuclear force.

With this context, KJU's Beijing visit is based in part from a position of strength. North Korea's nuclear arsenal has cemented its position as a critical element in regional security that cannot be ignored. This has by no means turned North Korea into a great power nor one which can dictate terms to others, but Pyongyang is capitalizing on its newfound status as a defacto nuclear state as Head of State summitry, specifically with the US, confers an image of equals. This attention and focus, as well, seem to have made KJU more confident in the role as a statesman with his China visit, while undoubtedly awkward and intimidating in some respects, a somewhat friendly trial run before his meetings with South Korea and the US. Beijing, as well, may be the best suited meeting place for KJU's meeting with President Trump for it allows the North Korea leader to travel to a safe country while enabling China insight into the bilateral summit despite not officially being asked to participate. Despite the ['brotherly neighbours'](#) rhetoric which defined much of KJU's official commentary in China, it remains unclear what exact nature of relationship North Korea is attempting to construct with their great power neighbour. KJU may be shoring up support with its larger economic and diplomatic backer but also maintaining distance by engaging with regional states and the US on a bilateral vice multi-lateral basis thus denying China a formal role to play in negotiations. It is far too premature to conclude this visit have transformed Sino-North Korean relations, but there persists a significant area of interest overlap between the two which

motivates continued engagement, and possibly coordination in moving forward with KJU's upcoming summit with President Donald Trump.

Strategic Interest Overlap and Commitment to 'Denuclearization'

China and North Korea are not military allies, but on a strategic level they broadly share a similar goal: the reduction if not complete removal of US power and influence from the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang views this a regime survival requirement, whereas for Beijing this relates to a larger objective of disrupting and eroding America's regional leadership and alliance system which defines the region writ large. Ongoing efforts to secure North Korea's relinquishment of nuclear weapons may be an opportunity for both to progress this shared objective.

In Beijing, KJU stated his commitment to denuclearization [of the Korean Peninsula](#) – a position Beijing also holds and supports. The wording here is important for North Korea is indicating its commitment does not imply unilateral disarmament, but rather a reciprocal process with the goal of ensuring a nuclear free Korean Peninsula. This could imply expectations of not only the reduction or removal of US forces but as well the elimination of American extended deterrence over and possible their alliance with South Korea. The American position is based on the [Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Denuclearization \(CVID\)](#) in which North Korea disarms in accordance with UN Security Council directive. Thus it remains unclear what if any security and economic concessions Washington is willing to concede. Removal of forces from the Peninsula, the region as a whole, and severing alliance relations with South Korea (or Japan) will not be seriously entertained.

With this likely impasse, China's suggestion of a [freeze for freeze option](#) may be necessary to ensure negotiations do not collapse before they begin. In this formulation North Korea would agree to the indefinite cessation of both nuclear and missile tests in exchange for the cessation of joint US and South Korean annual military exercises. Another possibility, as well, is the reduction or removal of certain American weaponry, specifically theatre missile defence systems which are [opposed](#) by both North Korea and China and somewhat controversial in [South Korea](#). Achieving a limited, reciprocal agreement of this sort could form the basis of further arrangements, acting as a confidence building measure towards eventual denuclearization. China's primary interest is in the immediate reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula which would be served by such an arrangement, as well as offering a possible avenue to leverage the diminution of American strategic power regionally. Beijing, unlike the West, appears more willing for a gradual, long term process towards denuclearization which at its core involves security and economic concessions by the West to incentivise Pyongyang as well as acknowledge, address and alleviate their concerns about regime survival.

Setting Realistic Expectations: A Phased Approach, Not a Grand Bargain

There are [legitimate doubts](#) as to whether KJU is serious about giving up his nuclear arsenal under any condition. It remains to be seen whether the US will be able to convince Pyongyang of the sincerity of any security guarantees in light of recent regime change campaigns in Iraq and Libya as well as Russia's annexation of Crimea despite Moscow agreeing to respect Ukrainian sovereignty as part of a deal to secure their relinquishment of nuclear weapons following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nuclear weapons, as well, are not just a security measure for Pyongyang, but an important symbol of the regime's identity and intimately connected to the Kim family dynasty legacy. In the history of nuclear weapons, South Africa is the *only* state to have dismantled an indigenously built nuclear arsenal; a case with a unique configuration of pressures and motivations accounting for this decision which [are not present](#) in the North Korea case. Nevertheless, negotiations with North Korea - while [never having secured](#) the full cessation of the nuclear and missile activities - have historically produced [stable periods](#) while they are ongoing. This in itself is a reason for engagement, even if it is seen to be largely a futile effort at actually securing Pyongyang's agreement to eventual disarm completely. With this in mind, a phased approach defined by a series of small, reciprocal and cumulative steps should be pursued vice some sort of overarching sweeping grand bargain. Ensuring the negotiations do not begin in failure will

require restraint, especially on the US part, of attempting to secure such a commitment in any sort of tangible form immediately. Preconditions are a non-starter. Instead, a series of alternative routes should be developed, including economic inducements and military concessions. In so doing the US should be clear there are areas that are simply not up for discussion, including their alliance commitment to South Korea and Japan.

Not securing a denuclearization deal does not condemn the region to endless instability nor present an unacceptable threat to the US and her allies. As with others which have become nuclear powers, North Korea is constrained in her behaviour, and there are already signs of its [decreasing](#) intensity and use of sub-conventional/conventional force on the Peninsula. Fears that Pyongyang will become insatiably revisionist in trying to take over the Korean Peninsula, secure in the belief their nuclear force will inhibit any US reaction, marginalizes the power of nuclear deterrence and US alliance commitments to South Korea and Japan. These factors – nuclear deterrence and strong regional bilateral alliances - have been effective against and durable in the face of far larger and more powerful adversaries past and present. North Korea is no longer a nuclear proliferation challenge, but instead a [nuclear deterrence one](#) which is best met by a redoubling of American commitments to extended deterrence to its allies as well as to maintain a policy of containment. The US should be clear any attempt to unilaterally alter the political and military balance on the Korean Peninsula will not be tolerated and result in the regime's elimination. As North Korea and the US further enter a state of nuclear deterrence with each other, they will both be constrained in the use of military power. While there are concerns the US is somewhat seriously contemplating preventative military strike, there are [no plausible options](#) in this respect which do not risk the outbreak of a major conflict, possibly including a nuclear attack on the continental US and most likely result in the erosion if not complete collapse of US regional leadership and alliances for initiating such a conflict. Such a condition provides the backdrop for negotiations in which there is room to manoeuvre to make concessions and reduce tensions without inextricably altering the status-quo to the detriment of the US and her allies. As with the Iran deal, however, any negotiated agreement should remain within the narrow confines of North Korea's nuclear program and not attached to other issue areas, like human rights and sanctions evasion, which should be dealt with separately.

Within this setting China is making its way back into the fold, in part motivated on it being bypassed by others which have constructed bilateral avenues of future engagement, most importantly between the US and North Korea. China can play a positive role in such negotiations, leveraging its influence and access to both leaders in Washington and Pyongyang in devising a suitable diplomatic roadmap to ease tensions and produce demonstrable results of restraint on North Korea's part in further progressing its nuclear and missile programs. It remains unclear if China wants or will be able to insert itself into these negotiations, reconfiguring them to something akin to the previous Six-Party Talks, but their role as a third party broker will most likely be used by both sides in creating back channels to ensure the May summit does not end in failure and/or increase tensions based on unrealistic expectations. China is a partner the US and regional partners should collaborate and continue to engage with on this matter, but it is important to realize that while Beijing and Pyongyang are not strategic allies they share a similar goal: the diminishment of US regional leadership and power. China would like to see North Korea eventually give up its nuclear arsenal, but it sees this as a long-term project which will require significant concessions from the US; concessions which also benefit China's regional geo-strategic goals. North Korea presents a leverage point Beijing can engage in to achieve a number of interests which go beyond simply reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

At the same time, however, the recent Kim-Xi meeting in Beijing should not be seen as China finally corraling its small and dependent neighbour nor KJU acting out of desperation or weakness in the face of constraining sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Instead, KJU appears to be engaging in a ['divide and conquer'](#) strategy playing off various states involved in this process through the pursuit of bilateral summitry vice multi-state arrangements. Whether KJU will be successful in this is unclear, and while North Korea's power and influence on account of its nuclear status should not be overstated it would be

mistake to portray North Korea as weak, ignorant or coming back into the fold of Chinese influence as some sort of compliant vassal. KJU is beyond anything else manoeuvring to prevent a universal international alignment against him, and therefore re-engaging with China is in part to ensure the issue of denuclearization becomes part of the larger Sino-American strategic rivalry over the region.

Adam P. MacDonald is a first year PhD student in the Political Science Department at Dalhousie University whose research interests include nuclear weapons and geopolitical and military developments in the Arctic and East Asia. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. The author may be contacted by email at:
RUSINovaScotia@gmail.com.

Recommended citation: Adam MacDonald, Coming Back Into the Fold? The Motivations Behind the Kim-Xi Meeting and Implications for 'Denuclearization' on the Korean Peninsula, Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia, April 2, 2018