

The Role of Chinese Influence in the Second Trump-Kim Summit

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There is a debate going on about whether China will play the role of “spoiler” – again – in the widely expected summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Trump has already openly complained, at least three times, that “China was behind” North Korea’s defiant attitude that led to the negotiations stalling last year. Will the same thing happen again?

To answer this question, we need to examine the Xi-Kim meeting that took place very recently in Beijing. Even for many Chinese analysts of North Korea, Kim’s visit to China this time was somewhat “unexpected” . Kim visited China three times last year; therefore, it was widely expected that it would be Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s turn to visit North Korea. Xi himself said he would do so, during his meeting in November last year with President Moon Jae-in.

It is also notable that Kim visited China on his 35th birthday. This inevitably suggests a sense of “urgency” , otherwise, why would the North Korean leader “skip” his birthday party at home to make a journey all the way to China, unless there was a pressing need that compelled him to do so?

Interestingly, Kim took a train as his means of transportation. Kim’s immediate two previous trips to China were by air. When Kim’s train passed through the Chinese city of Dandong that borders North Korea, it served as an automatic trigger for the watchful international media to react and write headlines. If Kim had traveled by air, his visit would have been less visible to the media. In addition, compared to air travel, a train trip offered the media more time to cover his journey.

It is then reasonable to believe that Kim staged his trip to China to be noticed. The “train” was also a major symbolic icon for the Sino-North Korea “traditional friendship” (chuantong youhao guanxi) during the Cold War era. His father and grandfather all used trains to visit China. Kim was following in their footsteps.

But for what purpose?

Kim’s decision to travel to China on the day of his birthday, and his choice of the nostalgic mode of transportation, create the impression that there is something “special” about the China-North Korea relationship. It establishes an appearance of a strong bond between Xi and Kim.

Since last year, North Korea’s relationship with China has changed dramatically – for the better. Since last year, China’s relationship with the United States has also changed dramatically – for the worse. Currently, Kim is negotiating with Trump on nuclear weapons. Xi is negotiating with Trump on trade. Kim Jong-un’s visit to China took place against this background.

There is a complexity in the strategic calculus that is intertwined among the different players in Pyongyang, Washington, and Beijing. The visit also happened alongside Trump’s public statement that a second summit with Kim would be held soon.

Regarding Kim, it is reasonable to believe that his trip is “preparation” for his upcoming summit with Trump, who has sent out mixed messages. Trump said he would meet with Kim, but made it clear that the economic sanctions currently imposed on North Korea would remain in place, going against Kim’s wishes.

For Xi, North Korea’s denuclearization is not necessarily his most important policy priority. China’s immediate and paramount priority is to “soft land” the ongoing trade war with Washington. China is seen as the country with the largest influence over North Korea, successfully reaffirming its influence by withholding information about Kim’s whereabouts once he arrived in Beijing. This kept Washington in an anxious guessing game about how Xi might have advised Kim on the upcoming U.S.-DPRK summit. Against the backdrop of the summit, China will be tempted to think about how to “utilize” Kim’s visit to serve China’s interests.

If China’s priority is to steer the trade war towards an amicable compromise, it is likely that it would, this time, help Washington’s outreach to Pyongyang instead of undermining it. It is possible that China may have used the Xi-Kim meeting to nudge Kim to be more forthcoming in denuclearization measures, as a sign of “goodwill” in China’s cooperation with the United States.

Washington maintains that the trade war (between the U.S. and China) and denuclearization (between the U.S. and North Korea) are “separate” matters; however, we should remember that Trump, upon inauguration, proposed to China that he would be willing to be soft on trade if China cooperated on the North Korean issue.

It is therefore perhaps unreasonable to conclude that Xi will again turn out to be a spoiler. There is a possibility that China, this time, may turn out to be a positive force in mediating between Pyongyang and Washington.

During Kim’s New Year speech, he said he would closely consult “parties to the Korean War armistice” to transform the armistice state to the peace state. Without naming China, this statement implies China. It is Kim’s invitation for China to play a more active role in North Korea’s stalemate in its negotiations with the United States.

Taken together, depending on how Xi envisions China’s relationship with the U.S., the outcome of Xi’s talks with Kim will have ramifications for the second summit between Trump and Kim, aimed at the denuclearization of North Korea.



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