



SPOTLIGHT

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Kim-Trump Meet in Panmunjom

Oskar Pietrewicz

On 30 June, U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met for the third time, in a meeting notable for Trump walking into North Korea. The event was mainly an image-building opportunity for both leaders but they did agree to revive working-level negotiations on denuclearisation and sanctions. For North Korea, the meeting is another step in overcoming political isolation. For South Korea, whose president Moon Jae-in accompanied both leaders, it was a chance to regain significance as an intermediary in the U.S.-North Korea talks.

What did the meeting mean for the U.S. and North Korea?

First, it was an historic photo opportunity. Trump, crossing the demarcation line in the demilitarised zone to meet Kim, went down in history as the first-ever sitting U.S. president to set foot on North Korean territory. He confirmed his personal commitment to the negotiations, believing that direct talks between leaders can lead to stabilisation of the Korean Peninsula. For Kim, a meeting with a U.S. president on his own territory strengthens his position as the leader of the nuclear state and an equal partner of the United States. Kim has not yet made concessions on denuclearisation and Trump's direct involvement in the talks allows the North to move from political isolation.

Why was South Korea involved in organising the meeting?

South Korea strives to influence the talks about the Korean Peninsula and the U.S.-North Korea dialogue. After the failure of the Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February this year, the North Korean authorities questioned the importance of South Korea in the diplomatic process. The meeting in Panmunjom proves South Korea has regained some initiative. Although Moon did not participate in the conversation between Trump and Kim (perhaps as a North Korean requirement), the fact that he took part, at least in a courtesy role, in the historic part of the event suggests that South Korea is an important intermediary in the U.S.-North Korea negotiations. Moreover, the Kim-Trump meeting increases the opportunity to revive the inter-Korean dialogue.

What are the next steps in the U.S.-North Korea dialogue?

According to Trump's declaration, working-level negotiations between the sides on denuclearisation and sanctions will take place within 2-3 weeks. To that end, the parties will restore the contacts limited after the summit failure in Hanoi. The U.S. delegation will be led by U.S. Special Representative Stephen Biegun, who met with the envoys of North Korea the day before the Kim-Trump meeting. It is not known who will lead the North Korean delegation. The working meetings scheduled for mid-July will be the beginning of a months-long negotiating process on denuclearisation and the relaxation of sanctions imposed on the North. However, the expectations of the parties are too divergent to achieve a breakthrough on denuclearisation, which may trigger new disputes and tensions, and even limit contacts again.