

# Why Trump's Meeting with North Korea Matters: The Asia-Middle East Connection

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAY 18 2018

Even as North Korea threatens to cancel its talks with Trump, the possibility of reaching talks with North Korea continues to matter greatly. After the initial news of potential talks, some news sources rightly noted that Trump's coming unprecedented meeting with North Korea's Supreme Leader could be the next Nixon and China. Others suggested that Trump would be duped by a savvy Asian leader who we cannot trust. Trump, who I would call the only successful U.S. President in my lifetime in terms of getting his policy agenda past the endless swill and sewage of a propaganda-centered Congress (on both sides), was presented by many on the left as some sort of weakling neophyte. That appears to be wishful thinking.

The initial South Korean announcement of the willingness to meet with the U.S. suggested that international solidarity and President Trump's "maximum pressure policy" was the reason for the nearly 70-year breakthrough. Something about Trump is working when the endless, puzzled, hand-to-chin "we just do not know how to proceed" *politics of ineptitude* of both left and old right did not.

North Korea has been a serious threat despite its own domestic issues and changes. It was recently identified as the most dangerous threat to the U.S. It has been treated by others as "desperate," as though it is a hanger-on just waiting for U.S. approval. This is how far Trump's detractors are willing to go down the road of outright propaganda – not for the betterment of the U.S. public, but simply to put themselves back in power.

The idea that meeting with our enemies is inherently giving something up and a bad idea can go out with the backward thinking of the past 25 years of head-in-the-sand *manipulation-diplomacy*. Indeed, Clinton was invited to meet with North Korea; he refused but did engage in (ultimately unsuccessful) bilateral talks using lower ranking U.S. officials. Both Clinton and Carter met with North Korean leaders when they were no longer President. Neither was successful at achieving long-term meaningful diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Diplomacy works. Sticking your head in the sand and hoping that your enemies will eventually allow themselves to be bought off with bribes (e.g., development aid, military aid, etc.) does not work. The making of multiple enemies as a show of ostensible strength, demonstrably, does not work. Both have been seen in 25 years of refusal-of-top-level-diplomacy regarding North Korea. Instead, it has landed us at the brink of nuclear conflagration with North Korea.

So, in addition to a diplomatic breakthrough on a nearly 70-year abyss of cold non-relationship between the U.S. and North Korea, why does this meeting matter?

One word: Iran.

North Korea has been allied with Iran. According to an important recent poll, the people of Iran, frankly, see the U.S. as an enemy of Iran on many levels: economic, military, political, and otherwise. According to the poll, they tend to support their own government's political policies in many areas, particularly relating to military, international politics, nuclear proliferation, and both domestic and international policies relating to religion. They would like the government to spend more on programs making life economically better for the average Iranian citizen, which was

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the topic of many of the recent protests. Protests and elections over the past twenty-one years also suggest that the population would like more reformist representation in the government. The poll shows that Iranians believe the July 2015 nuclear agreements improve Iran's relations somewhat with Europe, but not with the U.S. They did not trust that the U.S. will follow through on its commitments in this regard. They fundamentally just do not trust the U.S. Iranians show moderately-high views of China and Russia, and highly *unfavorable* views of the U.S. A numerical majority see the U.S. people positively (by contrast to government), and even more believe that common ground can be found between the wants and needs of peoples in the West and in the Islamic world, although many others do not.

Our differences with Iran are real and substantial.

Making peace with North Korea could go a long way to warming relations with Iran.

Iran matters. The Middle East and the Muslim world are profoundly influenced by a competition for hegemony among Saudi Arabia, our ally, and Iran, our enemy. This competition can be found in innocuous types of social, cultural, and humanitarian support, such as the building of mosques and hospitals. It also includes, however, Iranian funding of (outlawed) paramilitary organizations and support for the region's remaining violent dictatorship, that of Syria's Assad. Iran provides funds for Hezbollah and Hamas, and it has been a military ally to Assad during the people's revolution in Syria. Iran has worked with Hezbollah to support Assad, who is also allied with Russia. That is to say, an important diplomatic link has been developing between Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Russia.

We make big enemies – and cement bad allies as far as our interests are concerned – by being unwilling to work with major regional powers such as North Korea and Iran. Our isolation, in this sense, does not serve our interests. It creates conditions that our next generations will have to live with and which look far more like a world dominated by China and Russia, themselves supported by our erstwhile enemies, North Korea, Syria, Iran, etc.; and one in which we become increasingly isolated economically, militarily, and otherwise. By ignoring North Korea and Iran, we only cement our current enemies' love for one another and create a strong enemy alliance against ourselves in our (not so distant) future

Trump is by far the bravest politician we have had since Nixon.

Nixon was similarly the recipient of a concerted assault by the left, which has since conducted unprosecuted pure-corruption-in-office of a kind never seen before in U.S. history (although Tammany Hall's purchase of votes through paradigmatic practices of clientelism at least through the 1950s comes close). The rule of law crisis in the U.S. today at every level – local, state, and national – cannot be overstated.

Ironically, from my perspective as a Comparativist, if the talks do go through, North Korea may prove far easier for Trump to negotiate with than a U.S. Democratic Party establishment so profoundly committed, as it has proven itself to be, to political practices considered *clientelism*, *corruption*, and *fraud* if we were identifying those practices in any other country in the world.

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## About the author:

**Dr. Patricia Sohn**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor (with Simone Raudino) of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21<sup>st</sup> Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).