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Trump Raises the Stakes on the Korean Peninsula

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- Trump's sudden decision to meet North Korean leader Kim has raised the stakes in a way that both entices and alarms. Given that it comes without detailed preparation, it is an apparent roll of the dice.
- On the positive side, Kim's reported offer to suspend tests regardless of the upcoming annual US-South Korea military exercises appears a genuine concession. This week, at least, military action on the Korean peninsula seems less likely.
- On the riskier side, so much blank space is yet to be filled in that there may be any number of deal-breakers not yet visible.
- China has consistently expressed support for this sort of dialogue, but it will likely seek to retain a capacity to influence scope and direction.
- One cannot imagine a worse time to be punishing our allies Japan and Korea for steel and aluminum exports on dubious national security grounds.
- The pressure is on the White House to deliver. Tangible and significant US national interests depend on Trump's performance.

South Korean President Moon will meet Kim in April, presumably before Trump and Kim are to meet, although it has already become clear the US and South Korean narratives differ on timing. Washington says the time and venue for the Trump meeting with Kim are to be determined, but Seoul says the meeting is to occur by the end of May. The agenda for a US – North Korean meeting is unformed at present. The range of potential outcomes is wide. The US has a challenge keeping its allies together on this surprise step that leaves Japanese Prime Minister Abe in an awkward position. He and his constituents are far more skeptical of Pyongyang than are President Moon and his constituents in South Korea. In short, the sooner the US, South Korea, and Japan can start filling in the blanks, the fewer opportunities will present themselves for dissonance among the allies.

China also presents challenges. US-China ties have evolved in the direction of strategic competition and increasing trade friction. If the crisis on the peninsula were to veer in

directions unfavorable to China it would exercise influence, potentially at odds with the US and its allies.

What to watch for: is the Trump administration committed to a meeting in the same time frame envisaged by Seoul? Will the hard work of setting the conditions for a meeting become a negotiation that in itself could delay the prospective meeting between Trump and Kim? Who will Trump name to lead the preparations for the meeting and what will that person's background signal with regard to intent and motivation on the President's part? Will the implementation of annual US-South Korea military exercises in April present some pretext for Pyongyang to back off, its assurances notwithstanding, enabling it to try to re-engage for more concessions? Will US-China trade friction color the Chinese approach to US-North Korea dialogue, or, conversely, will the evolution of Trump's prospective meeting with Kim affect the pace and scope of US punitive trade actions aimed at reducing the US trade deficit with China?