



TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Goodwin Simon Strategic Research

RE: Key Research Findings on the U.S.-North Korea Summit

DATE: July 2, 2018

---

*This memo summarizes key findings from a four-day, in-depth online focus group conducted immediately after the recent summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un. Voters shared their perceptions about the long-term prospects for diplomatic efforts with North Korea as well as on potential consequences of military action with North Korea. The focus group was conducted among engaged voters nationwide June 18 to 21, 2018.*

- **Engaged voters are extremely anxious about North Korea**

These voters are well aware of North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities—including its increasing ability to target Guam, Hawaii, or even the United States with a nuclear missile—and they find these developments deeply troubling. As such, they are extremely anxious that some kind of resolution can be found to dissipate this threat.

- **Voters have confidence in diplomacy**

Most participants have more confidence in using diplomatic negotiations—rather than military force—to resolve the situation with North Korea. If the U.S. were involved in a large military conflict with North Korea, many participants feel at least somewhat confident about the U.S. earning a decisive military victory in such a conflict. However, they believe that neither side actually wants war, given extremely high costs in blood and treasure. In the words of one Republican voter, “Diplomacy is safer and I don’t think either side really wants to get into a fire fight.”

- **Learning more increases their confidence in diplomacy**

Notably, their confidence in diplomacy comes at the beginning of the focus group, before learning more about the U.S.-North Korea summit and the likely consequences of an armed conflict with North Korea. After seeing more information about North Korea's military capabilities, including a Face the Nation interview where Secretary of Defense James Mattis calls such a conflict “the worst kind of fighting,” people's expectations about massive loss of life increase significantly. Some of their most concerning elements about war with North Korea include:

- An estimate that more than 300,000 South Koreans would die under a barrage of 10,000 rockets per minute in the opening days of the conflict;
- The extensive arsenal of chemical and biological weapons that North Korea would likely deploy; and
- The potential likelihood that Kim would use his nuclear weapons early on in a conflict to avoid risk losing them altogether.

This knowledge, coupled with additional learnings about specific requirements for a successful agreement with North Korea, makes voters *even more* confident that diplomatic negotiations—rather than military force—can resolve the situation with North Korea.

- **Voters recognize the consequences of war are also economic**

In addition to the human costs, a majority of participants predict that a conflict with North Korea would result in higher consumer prices for Americans (especially for technology and electronic products manufactured in Asia), as well as a major drop in the U.S. stock market.

- **The summit provides reasons for optimism**

Voters recognize the unprecedented nature of the summit and how it represents an incredible opportunity after decades of hostility and intransigence. In this context, we see very strong support for talks with North Korea, with fully 28 of 30 participants favoring the U.S. negotiating with North Korea (and 18 of the 28 strongly favoring negotiations.)

- **Mixed views on Trump giving up military exercises**

Trump's decision to cancel military exercises with regional allies was hotly debated by these engaged voters in the focus group. About a third of the participants feel it is an important show of good faith, but the majority feel Trump gave too much away without receiving anything tangible from Kim. The two quotes below are illustrative:

*"I felt that canceling military exercises was an unnecessary concession since they were already planned and funded. Donald Trump's reasoning was that they were expensive but it would have been even more expensive to cancel or relocate. Furthermore, canceling the exercises cost South Korea and others in the region. He pleased a potential ally in spite of established allies."*

— Republican man

*"I think that's a risky pledge to make considering how unpredictable Kim Jong is. I don't think we're quite at that point where we should be taking our people out of there. However, if things improve, then yes, it would be great to have all those service men and women back home and safe. And if we're not there to help and Kim Jong attacks, everyone is extremely vulnerable."*

— Independent woman

- **Despite their concerns, most come to see cancelling exercises as valuable**

Although considerable media attention has focused on Trump giving away something for nothing, a compelling argument can be made that this move is a sensible first step as part of a long-term negotiation strategy. For example, 25 of 30 participants agree (and 11 strongly agree) with the following statement about cancelling military exercises:

While some claim that Trump gave up military exercises for nothing, others say he has been able to extract a number of important concessions. These include the release of U.S. citizens from North Korean prisons, a continued freeze on North Korean nuclear and missile tests, and a promise from North Korea to continue negotiations. These incremental, yet important steps, are exactly how negotiations are supposed to work, with each side giving something to the other.

Framed this way, Trump's decision can be seen as one of many deliberate steps, rather than as a wholesale giveaway. The idea that negotiations are an incremental process rings true with these voters, and in that context Democrats, independents, and Republicans alike become more comfortable with conceding military exercises at this stage in the process:

*“Steps are steps if it means stepping away from war it's worth it.”*

— Democratic man

*“Incremental steps are how negotiations are supposed to work. Each side giving something to the other. This entire process will be done with baby steps.”*

— Independent woman

*“To me, it makes sense that negotiations would happen in steps, instead of all at once.”*

— Republican woman

- **However, voters are skeptical about the long-term prospects for peace with North Korea**  
Given the high stakes involved, these voters appreciate that the U.S. and North Korea are talking. However, many raise important questions and reservations about whether their initial optimism will be rewarded with genuine progress. In particular, they are deeply skeptical about whether Kim can be trusted to keep his pledge to denuclearize, given his general unpredictability and record of breaking promises in the past. They also view President Trump as highly unpredictable, and also raise many questions about his long-term effectiveness in this arena. Questions about Trump include:
  - Will he rely too heavily on developing a personal relationship with Kim—at the expense of achieving a formal agreement?
  - Will he remain sufficiently focused to see these diplomatic efforts through?
  - Will something happen that triggers another tweetstorm of “fire and fury?”

- **Moving forward, voters want concrete assurances over symbolism**

Because the summit was so unprecedented, voters are willing to concede that its occurrence alone represents an important outcome—even if the summit itself was high on symbolism and low on specific steps toward denuclearization. What happens next, however, will be vital to whether or not voters view the process—and Trump’s talent for deal making—as something real and tangible versus all show and no substance.

As such, it should be concerning to the Trump Administration that the most dominant news event about North Korea is *not* about the two sides working together to craft the conditions for peace. Instead the news is about improvements to North Korea’s Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center. This development puts added pressure on Secretary of State Pompeo to move quickly and work with his North Korean counterparts to develop explicit next steps—even incremental ones—that can help U.S. voters retain their optimism about the diplomatic process.

The important thing to remember is that the spotlight’s glare can cut both ways. When Trump decided to meet with Kim, it provided him with a once-in-a-lifetime chance to shine on the world stage. But now that spotlight is pointed right at U.S.-North Korea relations—and the military threat North Korea poses—with a level of intensity far brighter than media coverage before the summit.

The world is now watching Trump walk on the diplomatic equivalent of the red carpet. And as we all know, walking the red carpet can be a lovely thing. But if you trip and fall, the world will never forget.