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# Reckless and Ruthless: Given their personalities, don't expect much rational from the Donald Trump-Kim Jong-un summit

Erika Simpson

Western University, [simpson@uwo.ca](mailto:simpson@uwo.ca)

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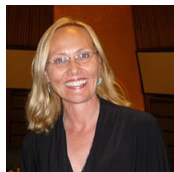
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## Erika Simpson

PhD, Political Science Professor

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# Reckless and Ruthless

## Given their personalities, don't expect much rational from the Donald Trump-Kim Jong-un summit

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- ERIKA SIMPSON



U.S. President Donald Trump has offered to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in face-to-face negotiations. Is it possible for both these leaders to engage under duress in rational decision-making?

Kim will come to the bargaining table as the commander of a million-strong conventional army. He controls operational and test-fired missiles that can credibly range thousands of kilometres through space. Trump is promising to develop a new branch of the U.S. military he calls Space Force specifically for war efforts in space.

Kim knows Trump could make up information, as he did in a meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Trump says he insisted the U.S. runs a deficit with its neighbour to the north without knowing whether that was true. If Trump lied to his country's closest military ally, and boasted about it later, he may tell Kim more untruths.

Trump is a seasoned negotiator, but Kim may be more ruthless. After all, he has to negotiate his own regime's survival.

Kim was born to one of three mistresses of his father and predecessor as leader, Kim Jong-Il, sometime between 1982 and 1984. Donald Trump, born in 1946, is twice his age.

Kim is the cut-throat leader of a dynasty that has ruled North Korea for decades. He presided over a meeting of the politburo during which his uncle was publicly stripped of his posts and the nephew had him executed.

Kim also ordered the execution of his former girlfriend, along with 11 other state entertainers, for allegedly making sex tapes and possessing Bibles. His girlfriend's family, along with singers and dancers in her orchestra, were forced to watch as she was killed by machine gun before a firing squad. Strangely, a year later, his ex-lover turned up alive and well on state TV.

Kim's older brother, Kim Jong Nam, died last year in a Malaysian airport, the result of what authorities determined was an assassination conducted by North Korean agents using nerve gas.

Will Kim be open to negotiation and compromise? When he became the supreme commander of the People's Army, with the military rank equivalent to a general, experts hoped his Swiss schooling and nonmilitary training in computer science would soften him. But refugees have reported thousands of spectators were forced to watch the hangings of more than 80 people in stadiums.

We have learned a lot more about Trump's negotiating style. Trump likes to appear tough — this week he is calling for the death penalty for drug dealers — but in North Korea, estimates are that from one million to 3.5 million people have been deliberately murdered out of a total population of approximately 22 million, and another possibly 3.5 million have died from starvation or hunger-related illness.

From Trump's perspective, the greatest threat from the brash young leader stems from his outspoken threats against the United States. Kim has repeatedly threatened to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike, and the regime has proved its nuclear weapons capability with many underground nuclear detonations, including a possible hydrogen bomb.

The Americans could threaten their own pre-emptive strike, but the actual size and location of the North Korean arsenal is unknown. The intelligence community puts North Korea's stockpile somewhere between six and 20 nuclear bombs, possibly spread around the country in hardened underground silos.

North Korea test-launched two intercontinental ballistic missiles in 2017, the second of which had sufficient range to reach the continental United States. Last fall, the country announced its further perfection of a hydrogen bomb.

Once Trump hinted about withdrawing the 28,500 American soldiers stationed in South Korea. Adm. Harry Harris, chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, told the U.S. Senate armed services committee last week that he believed Kim would do a "victory dance" if Trump followed through.

Such a move would also abrogate the United States' defence agreement with South Korea. The U.S. soldiers are armed with land mines that serve as a credible deterrent to an invasion by North Korea and are also one of the principal reasons why the U.S. continues not to sign and ratify the international land mines treaty.

It is evident China — not so much the United States — could exert the upper hand in any peaceful negotiations so as to ensure a soft landing for North Korea. Ensuring stability in the Korean peninsula is important for China since a North Korean regime collapse would result in an unmanageable influx of emaciated refugees into China.

Instead of hoping leaders remain rational under all circumstances, diplomats need to take rapid steps to denuclearize the peninsula. The first-ever UN High-Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament takes place May 14-16 at UN headquarters in New York. The conference will draw attention to the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, already signed by 122 nations (but not the U.S. or North Korea), and it will exert positive influence for dialling down the Korean situation. Erika Simpson teaches international politics in the department of political science at Western University and is the author of *NATO and the Bomb*. These comments are based on her contribution to a panel on May 15 during the UN disarmament conference.

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