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Steppe-ing up to the plate

Why Ulaanbaatar should host a planned meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un

Read this article in German.

After some initial sabre-rattling, Washington and Pyongyang seem to have reached a tentative rapprochement following this year's Winter Olympics in South Korea. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has since confirmed a face-to face meeting with the US president for 27th April. It will likely take place on the North/South border. However, Kim's recent trip to Beijing – his first foreign excursion since he became leader in 2009 – shows he may be willing to hold future diplomatic engagements outside the Korean peninsula.

A prime contender for future meetings is Mongolia. The landlocked nation has already signalled its willingness to host the Kim-Trump summit in meetings with American and North Korean diplomats.

It is well-placed to do so. Ulaanbaatar has both a US and North Korean embassy. Whilst EU ministers generally avoid making trips to Pyongyang, Mongolian foreign minister Damdin Tsogtbaatar was there in February celebrating 70 years of diplomatic ties between the two nations.

Mongolia is also considered neutral territory. It was officially declared nuclear-free in 2012, making it a credible broker in thorny negotiations over Pyongyang's atomic weapons programme.

Most importantly, Ulaanbaatar has managed to maintain warm ties with both Pyongyang and Washington. Wedged between the two dominant powers of Russia and China, it has always tried to foster good relations with third countries. Mongolia sees political, economic, and cultural ties with the West – the US included – as key to its independence.

Mongolian foreign policy rests on the assumption

The country's relationship with North Korea dates back to the Korean war. A fellow socialist

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state, it backed the North during the conflict, receiving hundreds of North Korean evacuee children. It was also the only country to keep its ambassador in Pyongyang during the air raids. Such gestures are remembered in North Korea to this day.

North Korean officials appear to feel at ease in Mongolia. During last year's Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Peace and Security, foreign minister Ri Jong-ho met Japanese and Canadian government representatives and joined a discussion with academics from South Korea and the US. Away from the podium, North Korean delegates had the chance to hold confidential conversations with representatives from countries that don't have formal diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.

Even in the internet age, geography still remains an important factor. When Kim travelled to Beijing, he took the train. Perhaps he shares his father's fear of flying. In any case, Ulaanbaatar is accessible by rail, so should present no problems on the travelling front.

Mongolian foreign policy rests on the assumption that to ensure the country's security, all conflicts in North-East Asia must be settled peacefully. As such, its government will do what it can to get Kim and Trump sitting at the same table.



Julian Dierkes
Vancouver

Julian Dierkes is an Associate Professor and sociologist at the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. His research is partly focused on democratisation and mining governance in Mongolia and shares some of the results of his research via the Mongolia Focus blog. Follow him at https://sciences.social/@jdierkes