

ARETE

OPINION ARTICLE

Is North Korea working towards political openness? A view on China, South Korea and the US summits

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I. Introduction

On June 25th 1950, 75,000 soldiers from the North Korean People's Army crossed the 38th parallel, the boundary between the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the pro-Western Republic of Korea. This invasion was the first military action of the Cold War. Three years later, in July 1953, the Korean War halted, but did not end. On 27th July 1953, a ceasefire between both parties was signed (but not a peace treaty), drew a new boundary near the 38th parallel, and created a 2-mile-wide "demilitarized zone" (also known as DMZ) that still exists today. In all, some 5 million soldiers and civilians lost their lives during the war (History, 2009). After 65 years of armistice, both Koreas might be reuniting, finally ending the longest active conflict in the world today.

2018 is, undoubtedly, a decisive year for the Korean Peninsula. Kim Jong-Un, North Korea's leader and grandson of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's founder, Kim Il-Sung, already had a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping last March, in the first

time Kim Jong-Un traveled outside his own country since coming to power, and is stated to meet with South Korean officials on April 27th, and in May with his archrival country's leader, US's president Donald Trump.

II. North Korea and China Summit: Kim Jong-Un's first steps in the international landscape

Last month, Kim Jong-Un traveled abroad for the very first time since becoming president of North Korea in 2011, to meet Xi Jinping in Beijing, becoming also the first time he met another world leader. Relations with China are crucial for the communist country, as most of its trade goes across the two countries' border. Beijing's willingness to enforce international sanctions squeezed North Korea's economy, which may have left no option to Kim Jong-Un but to go towards a loosening of its tight control on North Korea in order for the country to survive. Therefore, Pyongyang's goal was likely to win China's support in the international arena regarding the easing of sanctions and restrictions, especially ahead of talks with its southern counterparts and the United States.

Since 2013, when Kim Jong-Un executed Jang Song Thaek, his uncle, senior adviser, and thought to be one of most pro-China officials, relations between both countries have been rocky. Nonetheless, Kim's trip to China is a strong reminder of the lasting existing relationship between North Korea and China, since China first backed North Korea in the Korean War. Furthermore, for Kim Jong-Un to meet a U.S. leader before meeting his Chinese counterpart might have had severe consequences for the Korean regime (Lyons et al., 2018).

According to Chinese government agency Xinhua News, Kim Jong-Un told Xi Jinping that Pyongyang is committed to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and is willing to start dialogue with the U.S. and hold a North Korea-U.S. summit: *"it is our consistent stand to be committed to denuclearization on the Korean peninsula. The issue can be resolved, if South Korea and the U.S. respond to our efforts with goodwill"*.

Despite the summit being held between China and North Korea, the main issue was the upcoming US-Korea encounter scheduled to take place this May. One important element that was reported to have been discussed was Trump's firing of former National Security adviser, Rex Tillerson, and naming of John Bolton as national security adviser, as he has argued numerous times for pre-emptive strikes, and called for North Korea to give up its atomic arms immediately in order to avoid those attacks. Nonetheless, as Scott Snyder, a Korea expert at the Council on Foreign Relations stated, "*China has been kind of marginalized, and it was inevitable the Chinese would want to redouble their efforts to have influence*".

North Korea also has strong interests in Chinese 'know-how' on implementing economic reforms without endangering the one-party state ruling. Alongside Kim's declaration that North Korea had completed its nuclear development program, and therefore no more atomic or missile tests would take place, he proclaimed that the "new strategic line" for the country would be "*socialist economic construction*" (News18, 2018). In response to the hold in nuclear testing, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "*The Chinese side believes that North Korea's decision will help ameliorate the situation on the peninsula. China welcomes this.*"

As an example of this path towards economic reform (though it will not be called economic reform, for obvious reasons) and of North Korea's rapprochement to China, during his trip to China, Kim visited an exhibition in the Beijing tech hub of Zhongguancun¹, showcasing recent innovations by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and, according to KCNA² (Korean Central News Agency of DPRK), wrote in its visitors' book that "*we can grasp the mightiness of China*", as well as later telling the Party that North Korea needed to boost science and education to build "*a scientific and technical power and a talent power*".

Andrei Lankov, of Korea Risk Group, following the same line of thought, stated that "*Kim intends to pursue essentially the Chinese-style economic program he is busily implementing*".

¹ A vibrant technology hub known as "*China's Silicon Valley*", Zhongguancun has attracted tech firms in manufacturing, electronics and science, and has amassed nearly 20,000 entities since its inception as a center for high-tech enterprises (with a total revenue of \$560bn last year).

² The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) is the main, state-run news organization. It is responsible for all news in North Korea and also distributes photos. The content is available in Korean, English, Spanish and Japanese.

Therefore, it seems quite a logical move for North Korea and Kim Jong-Un to take care of relations with China, as it is their main ally and, being China and the United States in somewhat a trade war these days, it seems wise for the communist country to keep things calmed and not offend their Chinese counterparts. A sign of this China's foreign ministry said on Saturday it welcomed a move by North Korea to halt nuclear and missile tests, which it said would help ease tensions on the Korean peninsula and promote denuclearization.

III. The Korean Summit: will the Korean Peninsula be reunited soon?

Kim Jong-Un will meet his South Korean counterpart Moon Jae-in this Friday for the first inter-Korean summit in over a decade. In an effort to deescalate tensions and make good progress towards an eventual peace treaty between both sides, many gestures between both Koreas have taken place in the last few months, in what seems to be a path to a thaw in their relations.

As Alistair Coleman stated in BBC News, *“North Korean state media are toning down their traditionally hostile rhetoric, and presenting the North Korean leader as a warmer man, with a cleaner image”*. Another key change in North Korea’s international image is the involvement of Kim’s wife, Ri Sol-Ju, now being referred to as the “First Lady”, who is set to play a more active role in the traditionally male-dominated regime. One example of this brand-new engagement from Ri Sol-Ju in politics, had her being centre stage in DPRK’s TV³, while watching a ballet performance of *Giselle* by visiting Chinese dancers. Just few weeks prior, Kim's increasingly powerful younger sister, Yo-jong, stole the show at the March Winter Olympics (called by many the *“Peace Olympics”*) opening ceremony in South Korea's Pyeongchang, in which competitors from both Koreas participated under a single neutral flag (Coleman, 2018). This visit was a groundbreaking event, as she became the first immediate member of the North's ruling family to visit since the 1950-1953 Korean war.

South Korea, on the other hand, halted the propaganda broadcasts across the border at North Korea on Monday ahead of their first summit, reciprocating their northern

³ DPRK stands for ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, commonly known as North Korea.

counterpart's propaganda tone-moderation. This is the first time in more than two years the South Korean broadcasts, which include a mixture of news, South Korean pop music and criticism of the North Korean regime, have been stopped (Kim, C. and Chiacu D., 2018). About this decision, South Korean Defence Ministry said that "*we hope this decision will lead both Koreas to stop mutual criticism and propaganda against each other and also contribute in creating peace and a new beginning*".

Despite this exchange of good will and fine gestures, we must remember this is not the first time the two Koreas have mentioned a formal end to the Korean War (Work, 2018), so it should not be taken as a done deal. The key question remains: is Kim's sincere in his efforts to work towards a long-lasting peace?

Regarding this issue, there is certainly a lot of debate, and it is unclear whether we are discussing an honest move or a political necessity to loosen up the sanctions and restraints North Korea has been suffering in recent years. Firstly, we should look at formalities, especially in diplomacy and international relations; here, it is nothing short of remarkable that Kim will be going to the South (or more technically to the southern part of the demilitarized zone – or DMZ⁴) for the meeting, rather than having Moon become the third South Korean president to travel to Pyongyang without a reciprocal visit from his northern counterpart. Secondly, Seoul has announced its will to discuss a peace treaty with Pyongyang so that the 65-year old armistice can be finally replaced (Cossa, 2018). It is not South Korea's first attempt at signing one, but North Korea always refused arguing that since South Korea was not a signatory of the ceasefire⁵. The "*Four-Party Talks*"⁶ during the Clinton administration failed due to this issue. Therefore, if North Korea acknowledged Seoul's role in negotiating a treaty to officially end the Korean war, this would constitute a

⁴ The demilitarized zone was created at the end of the Korean War, when the United Nations (including the US), China and North Korea signed an armistice, signaling a temporary ceasefire, rather than a full peace treaty. Under the terms, the parties undertook to pull troops back from a military demarcation line by 2 kilometers each way (hence the buffer of 4 kilometers), alongside the 38th parallel.

⁵ The armistice was signed by military officers representing the US/United Nations Command and the Chinese and North Korean People's Armies – South Korea's leader at the time, Rhee Syngman, refused as he did not want to stop fighting the North.

⁶ The format of Four Party talks was launched by U.S. President Bill Clinton and South Korean President Kim Young Sam at their 1996 Cheju summit with the aim of reducing tension, building confidence and, as a more distant goal, arranging peace on the Korean Peninsula.

very significant policy shift, and would show clear intentions from the North to end war in the Korean Peninsula.

However, the most important topic regarding North Korea is denuclearization. South Korea's government has insisted in numerous occasions that denuclearization will be on the table, and that bilateral relations depend profoundly on Kim's will to give up on North Korea's nuclear arsenal (something Donald Trump has been very vocal about too). This seems the harshest task to be resolved during negotiations, as one of the traditional demands of North Korean leaders is to be recognized as a nuclear state (Politi, 2018). Moreover, Kim has also stated that his focus now is not on nuclear testing but on an accelerated production of nuclear weapons and missiles. Thus, while stopping tests is a good first step, it is certainly not enough to meet South Korea and US denuclearization demands.

Nonetheless, there are also many people who just do not believe any of Kim's gestures and statements. The main reason is that, as already mentioned throughout this article, this is not the first time the two Koreas have discussed ending the Korean War, and yet failed to do so⁷. Shin Beomchul, a professor at the Korean National Diplomatic Academy, told Bloomberg that Kim's comments respond to a "*very carefully coordinated calculation to build hopes of the world that it's open to changes that could possibly follow the summits*", but that the real and only intention is to confuse their enemies without ever giving up any nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, many argue that the inter-Korean summit possible achievements are rather limited, due to a series of several factors that mainly involve China and the United States. First, both superpowers are slowly building into a trade war, which would definitely obstruct negotiations (both play huge roles in the Korean Peninsula and in the region surrounding it) and could make this attempt a failed one for the third time since the end of the Cold War (Work, 2018). Even if China and the US solved their current conflict, Trump and Kim Jong-Un would still have to normalize their countries' relations – starting by

⁷ After the end of the Cold War, both sides agreed in 1992 to work to transform "*the present state of armistice into a solid state of peace*". Fifteen years later, at the end of the second inter-Korean summit in 2007, then-President Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il made a commitment to work together with interested parties to discuss a declaration of the end of the Korean War. Yet, despite the hopefulness surrounding those attempts, significant obstacles remained and made negotiations fail.

recognizing each other officially as sovereign states, which might be feasible, but certainly far from becoming a reality.

The most important questions, however, are: what does North Korea want in exchange for peace? And the United States? Historically, the communist country has sought peace negotiations with Washington (as South Korea did not sign the armistice itself), and demanded the immediate withdrawal of US forces as a non-negotiable condition for a treaty. Yet, this demand seems to have slightly faded in recent years, with Pyongyang becoming more flexible on the issue. Apparently, now local US presence is seen by North Korean leaders as possessing wider significance as a stabilizing force in Northeast Asia (especially regarding a possible Japanese remilitarization). Indeed, South Korea's President Moon Jae-in announced that North Korea is currently not asking that US forces leave; they "*only talk about an end to hostilities against their country and about getting security guarantees*". Still, as Clint Work states in a TheDiplomat.com article, the so-talked "nonaggression pact" presupposes a peace treaty, "*insofar as the former implies an agreement not to start hostilities, and the latter to end them*". In short, one cannot promise not to initiate a war if that war is still not over.

IV. The US-North Korea Summit: a history-changing event?

After a year 2017 in which tensions between Trump and Kim Jong-Un escalated to its highest level since the armistice to "end" the Korean War was signed, 2018 has brought what could possibly a historic moment: the leaders of North Korea and the United States seating on a table, face to face, in a meeting that will presumably take place in May or early June. Choi Jin-woo, professor of political science at Hanyang University in Seoul, said of Kim's offer for an encounter to Trump and posterior sudden trip to Beijing. "*It was very surprising. He is serious about making a deal with the United States to escape from the difficult situation they're now facing because of sanctions, but I'm not sure he's really willing to give up his nuclear program*".

While Donald Trump quickly agreed to the meeting, some government advisors, and members from the US Senate (which has a say in this kind of matters) showed some concern

regarding the President's attitude, he also reminded everyone last Sunday that the North Korean nuclear crisis was far from over, striking a cautious note a day after the North's pledge to end nuclear tests raised hopes before planned summits with South Korea and the US, via Twitter: *"We are a long way from conclusion on North Korea, maybe things will work out, and maybe they won't – only time will tell ... But the work I am doing now should have been done a long time ago!"*. On the same day, in pure Trump style, he also wrote a tweet claiming that North Korea had *"agreed to denuclearization (so great for World), site closure, and no more testing!"* (Washington, 2018). Yet, despite stating that it would stop nuclear testing and missile development, North Korea has not yet revealed whether it has any intention of abandoning its nuclear arsenal, and Kim has made it abundantly clear that nuclear weapons remain a *"treasured sword"*. As Jill Colvin said in a TIME article, *"being committed to the concept of denuclearization, however, is not the same as agreeing to it, as Trump claims"*.

When looking at the possible image of Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump shaking hands, it may remind us of a similar feat in recent history: Mao Zedon and Richard Nixon's meeting in Beijing in 1972, which marked the opening of relations between communist China and capitalist United States. Although Mao's China suffered from severe international isolation in much the way North Korea does today, Trump and Kim's meeting does not resemble Mao and Nixon's (Lake, 2018). First and foremost, China was far more important strategically and economically for both countries then (and now) that North Korea is for the US. Back then, Mao was somewhat motivated by its will to cooperate against a common enemy (by 1972, relations between USSR and Communist China had become rather rocky and harsh), whereas Kim has no way of capitalizing on any similar opportunity; Kim is, conversely, facing a very different set of problems today, which make the China-North Korea comparison rather useless.

The main issue for Kim is that North Korea is a weak country that depends almost entirely on China for survival; Mao China's relationship with the Soviet Union during the Nixon years was one of two rival great powers, not a client-state relationship that North Korea has with China. In short, as Bloomberg's columnist Eli Lake puts it, *"there is no chance this summitry will unshackle a great power the way Nixon's fateful trip to China did in 1972. The opening and normalization that began nearly 50 years ago has modernized its economy and lifted*

hundreds of millions of people out of subsistence poverty. Today China, whether we like it or not, plays an important role in world affairs; North Korea has none of this in its cards". Then, a new questions appears: why did Kim Jong-Un offer Donald Trump to meet next month?

According to Michael Auslin, a scholar on contemporary Asia at the Hoover Institution, there are two main theories as to explain Kim's offering. The first theory is that Kim is rather concerned (or even somewhat scared) by Trump's unpredictability, as now he does not know how far will the US go under his presidency. This perspective is fueled by the US-led "maximum pressure" campaign targeting North Korea's hard currency reserves and the damaging effects it might have caused. *"The breaking point has not yet come, but perhaps Kim can see it coming in the near future. In this sense, Kim is pursuing a summit with Trump to take the pressure off"*. The second big theory of Kim's motivation concerns the nuclear weapons Trump is trying to get Kim to relinquish. *"Now that Kim has shown he has a ballistic missile and a nuclear capability, he feels he can negotiate from a position of strength"* (Lake, 2018).

Another possible comparison could be made with a more recent diplomatic event: the US-Iran Nuclear Agreement. Lori Esposito Murray, in an article recently published on Defensenews.com, stated five key learnings the United States – and therefore, Trump – should include into the negotiation strategy that will be displayed in the US-North Korea summit. She states that, after Trump's announcement that CIA Director Mike Pompeo's meeting with Kim Jung-Un to prepare for the encounter went *"very smoothly"*, *"demands for a strategy for the direct talks become even more pressing"*.

First, Lori claims leverage from sanctions is strongest now and difficult to rebuild, and due to this advantage, the US should negotiate a permanent deal. Esposito believes that a "phased approach" (first achieve a freeze and then pursue denuclearization) would be *"a grave mistake. A phased approach will only kick the crisis down the road, as the consensus to maintain sanctions diminishes after a freeze"*. Second, US officials should include verifiable constraints on ballistic missiles; North Korean ballistic missiles are a real threat, and given the rapid advancement of its ballistic missile program, *"these missiles need to be constrained quantitatively and qualitatively, and the proliferation of missiles and missile parts need to be halted"*. Third, Trump must get congressional approval. Loris states that domestic support is essential for the U.S. to be able to fulfill its obligations and that *"would only be successfully achieved with congressional*

approval". Fourth, Lori declares that *"the US is better at putting sanctions on an authoritarian regime than it is at taking them off and providing economic benefits. The responsibility for the longer-term incentives should shift to China"*. Last but not least, she claims that the US should get the support of its allies. *"A significant achievement of the Iran deal is that it was negotiated by a coalition of partners. Nonetheless, its main shortcoming is that it did not have the support of regional allies"*. Thus, regional support (especially China) seems crucial for the US to succeed in leveraging the North Korean regime.

Nonetheless, theories aside, regarding this Friday's inter-Korean summit, Trump said that *"subject to a deal, both Koreas have my blessing"*. The key here, in order to understand what might occur in the Korean Peninsula after all these political encounters, is what Trump sees as a "deal": is it denuclearization, followed by security guarantees and sanctions relief? Is it the other way round? Or has he something else in mind that we are not aware of? Despite not knowing the answer to all these questions yet, we do know the important point here is that, judging by traditional behaviors from all involved parties, the order by which tradeoffs occur is just as important as the trade-offs themselves (Work, 2018).

V. Conclusions

With Kim Jong-Un's visit to Beijing, he started what could be a key period for North Korea and for the region. First, this Friday, the inter-Korean summit will take place, whereas the long-awaited US-North Korea encounter will occur in May or early June. Furthermore, several foreign-affairs analysts state they expect North Korea to send a delegation to Moscow in the coming weeks, furthering the series of international meetings with world leaders.

When foreseeing a possible outcome of this shift in North Korea's diplomacy and foreign policy, many take the news with cautious optimism, as Kim Jong-Un seems to be ready to put more emphasis on economic development and he may be willing to make concessions in exchange for growth. Furthermore, Kim said that North Korea no longer had to test nuclear bombs or intercontinental ballistic missiles, as his country had already completed

their development, and that he would focus fully on economic development. Lee Jong-Seok, a former South Korea unification minister, recently stated that *“we have looked only on the nuclear side of Kim Jong-un’s rule, trying hard not to look at the other side. He is ready to bargain away nuclear weapons for the sake of economic development.”* It remains to be seen, nonetheless, whether Kim will follow China’s path to economic growth, and opt for what could be called “socialism with North Korean characteristics”. We should bear in mind that Kim has two close models to look up to in China and Vietnam, both clear examples of communist parties embracing capitalism without jeopardizing the rule of the one-party state (and even managing to reinforce their positions in power by delivering increasing prosperity).

At the same time, South Korean president Moon Jae-in will be under intense international scrutiny when he meets Kim Jong-un on Friday, as it could be a history-making moment for the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, besides changing the fate of Korea, Moon will have to answer before their compatriots afterwards, as there is an increasing thought among officials and media that he is too pro-North Korea (Volodzko, 2018). However, it will not be until the Kim-Trump meeting that we will be able to say where things are headed. Even after the meeting, regardless if it goes well or not, reaching any lasting agreement will certainly take time. At this point, as Clint Work says in his *The Diplomat* article, *“is this something Trump and his hawkish advisers are willing to countenance? Is the lack of an immediate, grand settlement something Trump will consider “not fruitful” and thus unacceptable? Or is he merely looking for the appearance of a large international achievement, no matter its real substance, in order to offset mounting domestic and legal troubles at home?”* We will have to wait and see whether the answers to these uncertain questions should be reason for optimism, or for concern.

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