



**NORTH KOREA:  
CAN HOPE TRIUMPH OVER  
EXPERIENCE?**

BY RALPH A. COSSA

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has gone from international pariah to everyone's most sought after companion in a few short months. Since his "peace offensive" kicked off with his New Year's olive branch to the South, he has met twice with Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Moon Jae-In, while setting in motion preparations for a truly historic, first-ever summit between a North Korean leader and a sitting US president, which will possibly/probably/presumably/most likely/definitely take place on June 12 in Singapore. (Readers can choose whichever forecast best fits their assumption; today I would vote for "most likely" but who knows what tomorrow will bring.)

President Xi had previously refused to meet with Kim, reportedly out of frustration and annoyance with the North Korean leader's actions which "disrespected" Beijing. Suddenly, it appeared as if Xi is playing catch-up to avoid being marginalized in the emerging peace offensive. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo quickly began signaling his own willingness (eagerness?) to meet with Kim; can Putin be far behind? Abe also rushed to Washington seeking reassurance from Trump that their previously closely synchronized hardline approach toward Pyongyang would not be undermined. It's not clear he received it. Abe reportedly wants to meet Trump again before Trump meets Kim. One can never get too much reassurance!

President Trump has received – and taken – a great deal of credit in stimulating the North's diplomatic

overtures (although calls for awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize are incredibly premature) and there is no doubt his earlier "fire and fury" threats and "extreme pressure" campaign have contributed to the current flurry of diplomatic activity. How they have contributed remains a subject of debate, however. Did threats of war or increasingly tighter sanctions frighten Kim to the table? Or, did the prospect of conflict so scare President Moon that he offered incentives to Kim to cooperate? Or is this all part of a clever North Korean ploy, with Moon and Trump eagerly taking the bait? I fear the latter, but only time will tell.

North Koreans, of course, firmly reject the idea that they have been frightened or bullied into making their diplomatic overtures; Pyongyang sees itself entering into the diplomatic arena from a position of strength, not weakness, due to its "powerful deterrent." Skeptics (myself included) also see the assertion in the Moon-Kim *Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula* that "South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula," not as an acceptance of the US demand for CVID – complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization – but as a North Korean statement that Korea Peninsula denuclearization first requires global disarmament. It's been Pyongyang's longstanding position that it would be willing to enter into global disarmament talks with the US and other nuclear powers, an action that would essentially legitimize the DPRK's status as a nuclear weapon state.

The recent widely publicized demolition of North Korea's Punggye-ri nuclear test site has been interpreted by some as a signal of Pyongyang's sincerity. I see it more as a "mission accomplished" statement than as a commitment to denuclearize. As the *Rodong Sinmun* (the official newspaper of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea) noted, "[T]he whole course of dismantling the northern nuclear test ground eloquently proves the DPRK government's unshakable peace-loving stand to join the aspiration and efforts of the international community for a total stop to nuclear tests." Now

that his “treasured sword” has been finely honed, there is no need for further testing. Kim seems ready to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; is Trump?

As the hurriedly prepared second Moon-Kim Summit revealed, President Moon is extremely eager to keep the Trump-Kim summit on track. He’s been described as an “honest broker” or “neural facilitator” between the two unpredictable leaders. While Moon is certainly trying his best to be a facilitator, he is hardly “neutral.” He has a vested interest in the outcome since his nation’s security is very much at stake and, even without nuclear weapons, North Korea poses a formidable threat to the South which the US alliance helps to deter – South Korea has a dog in this fight.

It’s true that Moon is trying to serve as a bridge between the North and the US, but the thing about a bridge is that it gets walked on by both sides. Kim Jong Un can (and has) used Moon’s eagerness to his advantage and Washington has not shown Moon sufficient respect (if reports that the ROK did not receive a heads up about Trump’s cancellation notice are true). There is a fine line between being an honest broker and being the North’s accomplice. There are some in Washington, I fear, who are seeing Moon as the latter and this builds upon the distrust that any Progressive leader carries with him. In truth, Moon is doing what any ROK leader ought to be doing, which is, first and foremost, looking out for South Korea’s interests.

Skepticism aside, the Moon-Kim Summit provides cause for cautious optimism, although –as is the case with anything involving Pyongyang – the emphasis must be on the word “cautious.” One largely overlooked statement in the *Panmunjeon Declaration* seemed particularly significant: “South and North Korea agreed to actively pursue trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the United States and China with a view to declaring an end to the War, turning the armistice into a peace treaty, and establishing a permanent and solid peace regime.”

In the past, the North has argued that any peace treaty should be between the US and DPRK, or at most the US, DPRK, and China. The ROK was always the odd man out from Pyongyang’s perspective. Taken at face value, this statement indicates that Pyongyang is now ready to negotiate a peace accord with Washington and Seoul; it’s Beijing whose participation appears to be optional. If Pyongyang means what this says, this is an encouraging, potentially significant breakthrough. Rumors that President Moon may show up in Singapore at the end of the Kim-Trump Summit to declare an end of the 68-year Korean War underscore this possibility. There is little love lost between Pyongyang and Beijing, and China has been unfairly bullying the ROK since its decision to deploy the US THAAD missile defense system to defend itself and US forces from the North’s growing missile capabilities. Payback may be just around the corner.

The real concern with any “end of war” announcement is its impact on the presence of the United Nations Command and US-ROK Combined Forces Command. The former at some point is likely to be dissolved; the latter (and the US-ROK alliance) should exist as long as the DPRK is *capable* of threatening the South; proclaimed peaceful *intentions* can change overnight, it’s *capabilities* that matter.

By President Moon’s own admission, the Kim-Moon summits, symbolically important as they were in their own right, were also the scene-setters for the Trump-Kim summit to come. A more conventional US president would have insisted on some deliverables in advance of such a summit, which critics claim bestows undeserved credibility and prestige on Kim Jong Un. If we have learned nothing else in the past year or so, it is that President Trump is not your conventional US leader. The only thing rising higher than expectations about the summit appears to be anxieties that it could result in disaster. This disaster could take the form of Trump walking out in anger, leaving few options left on the table short of even more extreme pressure (which would be difficult to sustain, especially if the US was blamed for the summit’s failure) and/or some

type of military action. Or it could take the form of Trump being tricked into what seems like a good deal by Kim, whose real goal is not denuclearization but a lifting of sanctions and gaining international credibility and status as a member of the nuclear weapons club.

While one underestimates Kim at his own peril, the same could be said for President Trump. Recent personnel changes, including Mike Pompeo's position shift from head of the Central Intelligence Agency to secretary of State and John Bolton's transformation from Fox News' warmonger-in-chief to the president's national security adviser, insure that two hardline skeptics will be whispering in Trump's ear about any deal proffered by Kim. It's easy to guess what they will be cautioning; more difficult is predicting whether Trump will listen. For example, Bolton and Pompeo, along with most of the national security establishment, understand the importance of the US forward military presence on the Korean Peninsula (and in Japan) and would caution against negotiating it away. Rumor (reinforced by tweets) suggests Trump might be more inclined to play the troop deployment card. Any discussion of troop levels must include the ROK as well; *mutual* force reductions and other military confidence building measures is a topic for the North and South to jointly discuss.

While cautious pessimism is required, it's also true that the first step in making things better is to stop making them worse and, if that's the best we can hope for from the impending Kim-Trump summit, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Given the leadership system in Pyongyang and Trump's mercurial tendencies, it is absolutely essential that both leaders agree on general principles and overall objectives if there is ever going to be real prospects for peace on the Peninsula. But, while more traditional summits usually signal the end of a diplomatic process, the Trump-Kim meeting will at best merely signal the beginning.

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