

COMMENT

## **After the Peace Summit, Is there Reason for Hope in Korea?**

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**After the peace summit between North and South Korea, and before Donald Trump meets with Kim Jong-un, David Whitehouse explains what's changed and what hasn't.**

LAST FRIDAY'S summit between the leaders of North and South Korea brought feelings of relief and cautious hope to many people in the South.

Relief from the fear of imminent war really began over the winter, when North Korea agreed to participate in the Olympics in the Southern city of Pyeongchang. The face-to-face summit on April 27 went further, however, to kindle hope for reconciliation of the divided peninsula.

The South's President Moon Jae-in and the North's leader Kim Jong-un agreed in principle to bring a formal end to the Korean War of 1950-1953, to de-escalate current hostile activities and to reunite divided families.

Already, the annual joint U.S.-South Korean "Fool Eagle" war games were delayed, at Moon's request, in order to facilitate Olympic diplomacy. And the exercise ran one month instead of two, with no aircraft carriers, nuclear subs or strategic bombers [1].

Instead of presenting the usual nonstop print and video coverage of the war games, South Korea broadcast a K-Pop performance attended by Kim Jong-un in North Korea [2].

The Panmunjom Declaration [3], named after the "peace village" where the talks were held, also set the goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula as part of a "phased" program of two-sided disarmament.

Kim and Moon also spoke in general terms of working toward reunifying the country, which has been divided since the Japanese colonial occupation ended in 1945.

Kim's commitment to denuclearization is supposed to clear the way for direct talks between Kim and Donald Trump in late May or early June. Because the U.S. has been North Korea's primary antagonist, the Panmunjom statement left the means—and even the meaning—of denuclearization as a point for Trump and Kim to haggle over.

No one, including the direct participants, knows where these diplomatic openings will lead. But major changes are possible. There is a potential for shifts in the economic and political alignments of Northeast Asia, a region with dynamic economies—and a strategic location at the junction of U.S. and Chinese spheres of influence.

**ANYBODY WHO relies on the U.S. media** has to deal with additional problems of interpretation,

since coverage of North Korea throws up a fog of falsehoods that obscure the real behavior and motivation of the regime.

The confusion begins with understanding how Trump, Kim and Moon got to the point of talking in the first place.

To hear Trump tell it, Kim is willing to talk about disarmament because of the U.S. campaign of “maximum pressure,” which has included ever-harsher UN sanctions and multiple threats of war.

For his part, Moon has echoed this diagnosis, but he’s not the only person who’s learned to stay on Trump’s good side by flattering him. As *New York Times* reporter Choe Sang-Hun noted, Moon “has gone to great lengths to play to Mr. Trump’s ego [4].”

The war threats didn’t deter Kim from conducting a rapid string of missile and bomb tests last year. And the sanctions, harsh though they are, have not—so far—crushed the economy or brought the regime anywhere near collapse.

Sanctions seem to have cut exports significantly, but many countries, including China, are helping the regime to get around the restrictions [5]. Consumer prices and the won, the North’s currency, both appear to be stable [6]. In short, the regime of Kim’s father weathered much worse during the famine years of the 1990s.

To find the origin of the current diplomatic opening, we should really look first at the South’s Moon Jae-in—who began the pursuit of direct talks when he came into office last May.

Moon persisted in this aim right through last year’s flurry of weapons tests and war threats. In August, he stood up to Trump’s talk of “fire and fury” by declaring that there would be no war in Korea against his government’s will [7].

Moon’s initiative made a difference, but so did Kim Jong-un’s—beginning with the weapons program itself. The declared aim of the program has been to deter any U.S. attack by building weapons that could reach the U.S. mainland. This goal was bound to get the attention of the U.S. national security apparatus, whose doctrine counts any deterrence of U.S. military action as a direct military threat [8].

By the end of last year, Kim called a halt to further tests and said that the North was satisfied that its weapons will now work as planned. The rapid arms development put pressure on Trump to talk to Kim, since Trump’s own “maximum pressure” had failed to block the creation of the North’s deterrent.

It’s no mystery, then, why Moon and Trump want to engage. Moon wants, first and foremost, to prevent his country from becoming a battleground again. Trump wants to reverse Kim’s ability to target the U.S. with nuclear weapons.

There is, however, some mystery about what’s driving Kim’s actions. Kim’s endorsement of denuclearization seems to be a turnaround from the stance he has professed up to this year. He said as recently as last August that the North’s nuclear weapons were “not a bargaining thing [9].” Instead, Kim demanded recognition of the North as one of the world’s nuclear weapons powers.

He can’t use the weapons, of course, because the U.S. would respond by destroying his regime. Yet his recent actions, including his first direct talks with China and South Korea, have put Kim’s confidence on display. He clearly thinks his armaments put him a strong bargaining position.

Kim may realize that the weapons strengthen his position most if he treats them as something he might be willing to bargain away. Kim will come to the table primarily because he wants to hear what Trump might offer.

The offer might eventually turn out to be big. The story of the past year can only hint at the seismic changes that may really be in store.

**YOU WOULDN'T know it from U.S. media reports**, but North Korea has sought for more than 25 years to break out of its economic and political isolation—including its heavy dependence on China.

Kim's father and grandfather both reached out to U.S. presidents with offers of peace because they thought that U.S. power and economic connections could serve to counteract Chinese influence.

North Korea's ruling establishment has been under a squeeze since the late 1980s, just before the end of the Cold War. Its two major allies, the USSR and China, noted South Korea's massive economic growth and established diplomatic relations with the South—thereby diminishing their attention to the welfare of the North.

The USSR was North Korea's most important patron. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, the new Russian state took a hostile stance and ended all economic favoritism toward the North. Kim Il-sung, the current Kim's grandfather, was pushed into greater dependence on China just when China was losing interest in his country.

The economic [\[10\]](#) and military [\[11\]](#) squeeze from the other side—from the West and particularly the U.S.—had been a constant since the end of the Korean War. Hoping for a breakthrough in relations with U.S., Kim gave a well-publicized speech in 1990 declaring that the North was willing to make peace even while the U.S. still had troops in the South.

Kim, wrote Don Oberdorfer in *The Two Koreas*, “sought a relationship with Washington, hoping the United States would act as a balancer and protector against what he feared were potential threats from either China or Russia.”

Thus, despite what we hear today in the U.S. media, it's not unprecedented for a North Korean leader to say, as Kim Jong-un recently has, that the North could accept a peace that includes U.S. troops on Korean soil.

As the U.S. brushed off North Korean overtures, the North pursued its nuclear weapons program as a bargaining chip for future talks—and as an insurance policy against the U.S. if talks kept failing.

**AS FOR the South, Kim Dae-jung** won the South Korean presidency in 1998 and immediately pursued a new “Sunshine Policy” of engagement with the North.

The aim was to foster an extended period of economic cooperation to raise the economic level of the North on the way toward ultimate unification. South Korea's ruling establishment wanted to avoid the type of dislocations and mass unemployment that resulted when East and West Germany merged rapidly at the end of the Cold War.

Another aim of the gradual approach was to reassure Northern rulers that their own political and economic establishment would not be overrun by the elite of the more-advanced Southern state.

Both North and South floated proposals for an extended period of loose confederation, which would preserve the Kim regime's power in the North and a continued U.S. presence in the South. Kim Jong-il, father of the current Northern leader, reached general agreement on these points with Kim Dae-

jung at a summit in 2000 [12].

Oberdorfer, who was a Washington Post reporter at the time, says in his book that the North also agreed with the South in the late 1990s that U.S. troops could remain even after reunification.

Running parallel to the North-South discussions, the U.S. under Bill Clinton had agreed back in 1994 to normalize relations with the North in exchange for an end to Kim's nuclear weapons program.

The plan was to proceed in a series of steps, including the US. opening up trade and access to credit, while the U.S. would help supply the North's energy needs with fuel oil. Meanwhile, the U.S. would build—and the South would finance—two nuclear reactors suitable for energy, but not for making weapons fuel.

These measures would also facilitate normalization between the North and Japan, which would likely prompt Japan to pay reparations for the crimes of its 35-year occupation—just as Japan paid in the 1960s as a price for normalizing relations with the South.

The general idea, on paper at least, was that North Korea would—enthusiastically—move out of China's exclusive orbit and inch its way into the U.S. sphere of influence.

Clinton, however, followed through on nothing except the delivery of fuel oil. His administration's posture for most of his tenure was that the North was on the verge of collapse anyway, and the U.S. should wait it out—especially after the Republicans won the midterm elections in 1994.

When George W. Bush came into office shortly after the 2000 North-South summit, he sought to undermine the Sunshine Policy [13]. Soon, he cut off fuel oil shipments to the North and named North Korea as part of an "Axis of Evil."

**LEADERS OF the North and South**—not to mention China's regime—are much more aware of this history than Donald Trump is. Trump's slapdash foreign policy team has no chart forward that's nearly as elaborate as the many options the Koreans have already thought through.

Trump could get lucky, though. Through his engagement with the North, he could stumble into an outcome that builds U.S. influence in the Korean peninsula at the expense of China's.

That's because the Koreans have already set the table, beginning as far back as 20 years ago. Northern and Southern negotiators in the 1990s (and since) have tried to work out steps toward their own unification that were also crafted to entice the approval of U.S. imperial planners.

For this reason, Moon Jae-in's dogged pursuit of peace talks may deserve praise as an effort to avoid war, but it doesn't represent a step toward independence from the U.S. as a superpower.

Moon doesn't simply welcome the continued presence of U.S. troops—he supports it. In September, for example, he sent riot police to break up a protest against the U.S.-supplied THAAD anti-missile site in Seongju, injuring 30 [14].

Even if peace with the North is possible, the South would probably stay under the U.S. "missile shield"—which is just as much about facing off with China as it is about any threat from the North.

In Moon's vision, it seems that a reunified Korea would remain in the U.S. imperial camp. It would not strike out on its own as a "third camp" between the U.S. and China. This stance provides the context for us to understand his fawning suggestion that Donald Trump should get a Nobel Peace Prize if talks are successful [15].

**JAPANESE AND Chinese officials** have expressed concern that their interests could be left out of the direct talks between Trump and Kim. Moon's next diplomatic stop is to meet with the prime ministers of the two countries on May 9 [16].

Japan's Shinzo Abe has demanded that Trump include the North's shorter- and medium-range missiles—which can reach Japan—when Trump talks to Kim about disarmament. He also wants the North to account for Japanese citizens that the North abducted in the 1970s and '80s.

Abe's concerns may be easier to accommodate than China's, because the North probably wants to include Japan in any movement toward diplomatic and trade normalization. As part of its own sanctions, Japan has banned the remittances that Korean workers in Japan send back to North Korea. Over the years, remittances from Korean expatriate workers have formed a significant portion of North Korea's foreign exchange.

Chinese officials seem to be quite wary of one-on-one contact between Trump and Kim. "Any bilateral deals could take place at China's expense if Beijing doesn't have a seat at the table," Zheng Yongnian, director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, told the *Financial Times*. The FT reporter, Charles Clover, noted that "public views of China experts such as Zheng often mirror the private views of policymakers."

Meanwhile, Zhou Tong, a Korea specialist at Beijing's Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, told Clover, "Many Chinese experts are worried about a reunified Korea with a security alliance relationship with the United States and with U.S. troops to stay on the peninsula."

Kim visited China for the first time in late March on the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping, but the trip was Kim's idea [17]. Maybe he felt that the prospect of a meeting with Donald Trump gave him some leverage with China.

In any case, China appears to have loosened sanctions enforcement after the visit. A human rights group reported that, within days of Kim's visit, some 400 North Korean women workers were crossing the border and returning to a Chinese electronics factory. North Korean-owned restaurants also reopened in northern China.

The *Financial Times* also reported:

*Since Mr. Kim's trip to China, oil shortages in North Korea appear to have eased—something experts attribute to a likely increase in Chinese supplies—and Beijing has been outwardly more confident. Wang Chong of the Charhar Institute in Beijing, said the meeting between the two leaders meant "the settlement of the peninsula issue cannot be reached without China's contribution...I do not think China is excluded. Only some countries take turns being out in front."*

If this kind of report is right, then Kim is already able, to some degree at least, to pit China and the U.S. against each other to his own regime's advantage.

"China's power over North Korea is largely economic—90 percent of [North Korea's] trade travels through China, giving Beijing a tremendous source of leverage," notes Clover of the *Financial Times*. A Northern opening to the West and Japan could undermine China's leverage.

Kim may yet realize his grandfather's hope to gain a Western patron and dig North Korea out from under its exclusive reliance on China.

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## P.S.

\* May 2, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/05/02/is-there-reason-for-hope-in-korea>

\* This article also appears at Works in Theory.

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## Footnotes

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