

## Spring Time in the Korean Peninsula after a Long Winter?

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What a difference merely twenty weeks can make in the Korean Peninsula (KP)! In late April BBC described North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (KJU) as a ‘humanised statesman’, President Trump said that those discussing an end to the Korean War would “certainly have my blessing” and another venerable British newspaper was forthright enough in admitting that the ‘world’s commentators, including (us), have underestimated the North Korean leader’ (*The Economist* 2018). KJU was no longer a ‘blood-thirsty dictator’ who had ‘fed his uncle to dogs’ or a ‘fat rocket man’ out to destabilise peace and security in and beyond the KP. He was ‘intent on working to advance the cause of peace and national reconciliation’ opined BBC, while President Trump hailed KJU’s decision to suspend nuclear and ICBM tests as ‘big progress’ (*Financial Express* 2018).

How could the volatile KP start talking peace and reconciliation so unexpectedly? What caused the pendulum to swing from the depths of despondency on 31 December 2017 to the ridge of high hopes and détente by mid-May? Was it for real? Where could things go wrong? What would it take to consolidate the process? Had a roadmap been agreed to? Does India have a role to play in the process? These questions need to be addressed.

### North and South Korea Follow Different Paths

KP has been and remains a playground of the big powers. China regards North Korea (DPRK) as a buffer state. The US continues to maintain troops in South Korea (ROK) and is responsible for its external security. The two Koreas, technically still at war with each other, have for a variety of reasons, gone their separate ways since the 1953 Armistice.

Resource-rich DPRK is now an impoverished and brutal military dictatorship. It is insecure and isolated, but a de-facto NWS (Nuclear Weapon State) having an ICBM with a range of 13,000 km, besides an array of short, medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles. It is heavily sanctioned and feels vulnerable to a US-led military attack. The American neo-cons have always sought regime change in Pyongyang (PY). The Trump Presidency and a sense that it could no longer fully count on China, has accentuated its sense of paranoia. All the same it has defied regular predictions of collapse by experts and managed to stay afloat with a 3-4% annual GDP growth in recent years. The quality of life in DPRK though still spartan has improved somewhat.

ROK has meanwhile staged an economic miracle and become an OECD nation, whose per-capita GDP is 20-times that of North. It is a vibrant democracy, a hi-tech power and one of the most innovative nations in the world. However, it yearns for normal ties and eventual reunification with DPRK, even on the basis on 'one country two systems'. Over the past decades KP has seen hope flicker and fade on more than one occasion.

## Heightened Tensions in 2017 and Unexpected Dawn of Hope

2017 was a particularly difficult year for KP. Tensions were running high. PY was testing one sophisticated missile after the other, surprising analysts. In November it test-fired an ICBM capable of hitting the continental USA. Washington was doubling down with crippling sanctions, which were shrugged off by KJU, partly because China, while endorsing them at UNSC kept finding loop-holes to circumvent them on ground. President Trump spoke of a 'major, major conflict' with DPRK. He also put Beijing on notice – 'If China is not going to solve North Korea, we will' (*BBC News* 2017).

Trump had tweeted on August 11 – "Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely. Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!" And as the situation was spiralling out of control, KJU's Jan 1 overture, took everyone by surprise. He offered a peaceful dialogue with ROK and participation in PyeongChang winter Olympics. Seoul grabbed the offer with alacrity and events unfolded at an incredible pace thereafter. ROK-DPRK (27 April) and US-DPRK (12 June) summits were agreed to. KJU promised to suspend all WMD tests and move towards denuclearization provided the security of his regime was guaranteed.

With a few bold moves KJU managed to change and wrest control of the narrative in KP. A reviled dictator, virtually overnight he metamorphosed into a thoughtful leader. His favourable rating among South Koreans ballooned to 80% in contrast with 77.4% that of MJI (Oh 2018). Japan, Russia, China and

others began courting him. KJU had changed course for a number of reasons. For the first time DPRK, he reckoned, had developed the requisite WMD assets to ensure regime safety and thwart a possible US led military strike. While PY may still not be able to pose a realistic threat to the continental USA (it has yet to perfect a heat shield for missiles and successfully miniaturize a nuclear warhead), yet it now has enough firepower to cause an unacceptably high level of damage to Japan, Guam and ROK. He knows that unlike Washington, Tokyo and Seoul shudder at the thought of conflict. As important was the fact that the sanctions had begun to bite and Trump's bellicosity was creating a level of uncertainty.

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An avid DPRK watcher was spot-on in observing – 'KJU is smart, calculating and cruel – yet not sadistic for the hell of it. ...His strategy is to fill hearts with fear and bellies with food. From the start he has encouraged petty capitalism, unlike his father. Private trade is rarely persecuted these days. State enterprises have won autonomy, or in effect been privatized' (Andrei Lankov quoted in *The Economist* 2018). The New York Times opined - For as long as KJU has been North Korea's leader, he has followed the policy (known as *byungjin*) of simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic growth, with the aim of making the nation a "great socialist nuclear power (Choe 2018).

## Patch-up between China and DPRK

Under KJU's rule bilateral relations with China were strained. He had not been invited to visit China even once. PY's determination and rush to master the advanced WMD technology

was bringing pressure on Beijing, seen its sole ally and economic lifeline. A day before President Xi (XJP) was to hold his first summit with Trump (17 April 2017) KJU conducted yet another ballistic-missile test, thumbing his nose at both presidents. China was caught in a cleft stick. It could neither disown nor rein in DPRK. Max Baucus, the US Ambassador to Beijing until January 2017, recalls President Xi, privately expressing “disgust” at KJU’s reckless pursuit of nukes and missiles to carry them to other continents<sup>6</sup>. Also worrisome for China was that, the strategic community and populace in ROK had begun debating the merits of going nuclear itself.

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A poll in August 2017 found that only 27% of South Koreans favoured keeping their country nuclear-free (*The Economist* 2017). ROK had tried twice in the 1970s to acquire NWS but was pressed by USA to stop. Japan too has the technological ability to quickly go nuclear, if it so wishes. Post Jan 1, Beijing suddenly found itself out in the cold.

Having played a pivotal role in KP for decades, it could not stomach being rendered a mere bystander with PY, Seoul and Washington calling the shots. A summit invitation was extended to and promptly grabbed by KJU. The two leaders met in Beijing (25-26 March) and again in Dalian (7-8 May). The sides were all smiles and the right buttons were pressed. China is keen to have a spot on the negotiating table and prefers a SPT (Six Party Talks) like format. KJU is on board, though XJP will have to content with telephonic consultations with Trump, at least till the first DPRK-US summit is held, possibly in Singapore. The Beijing and Dalian meetings have also enhanced KJU’s bargaining power.

## Inter-Korean Summit on 27 April

As anticipated the third ever inter-Korean summit was fruitful. The earlier summits (2000 and 2007) had been held at Pyongyang. This time KJU crossed over to Panmunjeom Peace Village, located in the South. The two leaders even embraced and jointly addressed the media, which was telecast live.

A Joint Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity & Unification was adopted, salient points of which are as under:

- ❑ No more war on KP; new era of peace begins
- ❑ DMZ to be transformed into peace zone; all hostilities to be ceased
- ❑ Disarmament in a phased manner as progress is made in military CBMs
- ❑ Common goal to secure complete denuclearization and a nuclear-free KP
- ❑ Armistice to be converted into Peace Treaty during the year in consultation with USA (& China)
- ❑ President Moon Jae-in to visit Pyongyang this fall.

The sides further pledged to enhance economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. The big challenge however remains that everything agreed to between the two Koreas is contingent on the US endorsement and a successful Trump-Kim meeting. Only the US, China and DPRK (not ROK) were signatories to the Armistice agreement.

## The Big Stumbling Blocks – CVID and Security Guarantees

During his visit to Beijing, KJU had set his terms, stating that denuclearisation of KP could happen if ROK and the US were to create an ‘atmosphere of peace and stability’ while taking ‘progressive and synchronous measures’ for actualizing it (Choi 2018). And therein lies

the big disconnect between the two sides. The US wants DPRK to completely, verifiably and irreversibly denuclearize (CVID) first, before the sanctions are lifted and economic assistance is resumed. That is a deal breaker for PY. It is insecure and paranoid. It is convinced that the US is out to destabilize and topple the present regime. This in fact has been the stated position of hawks like Secretary Mike Pompeo and NSA John Bolton, who now hold crucial posts in the Trump administration.

KJU has drawn the requisite lessons from the fate of Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein. He knows that the Americans can be fickle and adjust their positions as per political exigency and expediency. Trump's decision to pull-out of JCPOA with Iran came as a timely reminder to DPRK, not that one was needed. Former CIA director John Brennan said Trump's "madness" had "undermined global confidence in U.S. commitments, alienated our closest allies, strengthened Iranian hawks, & gave North Korea more reason to keep its nukes" (*The Korean Times* 2018). President Bush had similarly scuttled the 1994 'Agreed Framework' negotiated by the Clinton administration with DPRK terming it as a part of the 'Axis of Evil'.

The KIMs have staked everything on developing WMD deterrents which are seen as insurance for regime safety. No amount of financial and economic sops is likely to induce KJU to give-up the only trump card that he holds. He rightly trusts nothing and nobody, except his WMD assets. No other assurances of regime security may be good enough for him. He will be agreeable to any arrangement short of CVID, including blowing up the testing sites and imposing a freeze on the nuclear programme under the UN / IAEA safeguards. His preference of course would be for the 2008 India-like deal, but that may not be forthcoming.

## Does India Have a Role in KP?

Despite limited resources, India sent a medical mission to KP once the inter-Korean war broke-out in June 1950. The Mission's work was appreciated all around. Later, both the warring sides accepted a resolution

sponsored by India, and the ceasefire was declared on 27 July 1953.

India is respected in both Koreas as a benign and rising power. We have maintained formal diplomatic relations with both Koreas since 1973. Some Indian academics have been suggesting that New Delhi should offer its good offices to help resolve the Korean conundrum. Yet we are no longer seen as neutral. Since the late 80s our relations with ROK have been steadily strengthening, but gradually declining with DPRK, for two reasons.

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One, ROK now a vibrant democracy has taken leaps in economic development. Our trade with ROK currently stands around US\$20 billion. We have also established a strategic partnership. On the other hand, DPRK has become an economic basket case and an international pariah. We were once the second or third largest trading partner of PY, but no longer so due to the sanction. Our contacts with Pyongyang are down to a trickle, notwithstanding the recent visit to PY by MOS V K Singh on 15-16 May. We have opened condemned North Korean armed provocations against the South and its nuclear / missile tests. Two, we have been greatly concerned at the WMD proliferation by DPRK, especially its illicit missile and nuclear collaboration with Pakistan, which has had a direct and adverse bearing on India's security.

But the biggest reason why we should stay out of KP is that, we have practically no leverage and nobody has invited us in. The reality is that only two countries can make a difference – the US and China. They have the necessary coercive and persuasive powers and can deploy both carrot and stick. India has neither. Even Russia and Japan are marginal players.

## Trump Kim Summit – Not if but When and Where?

The North Korean leadership has always sought a direct meeting with the US Presidents but had been rebuffed. That this big prize is likely to go to young KJU, speaks volumes of his political skills. In the first flush it seemed that it was an impulsive decision by Trump, during his March 8 meeting with the South Korean NSA. However, it transpires that the US and DPRK were quietly in contact for months at various levels, at New York, Pyongyang and perhaps also Beijing. Former Secretary Tillerson had said so in Beijing in September last year. It has since been disclosed that Mike Pompeo had twice visited PY for meetings with KJU in April and May. He had returned reassured of KJU's intention to find a modus vivendi with Washington.

Thus, PY's threat on May 16, to pull-out of the summit and also cancel talks with ROK, added yet another unexpected twist to the tale. The provocations included - public criticism of DPRK's human rights record by the Americans, resumption of joint ROK- US military exercises that are seen as a rehearsal for invasion by DPRK and an ill-advised comment by NSA John Bolton that the US desired Libya-like denuclearization by PY. President Trump was quick to clear the air but the trust deficit obviously widened further. He even threatened NK - ‘..if you look at that model with Gaddafi, that was a total decimation.... *Now that model would take place if we don't make a deal, most likely*’ (BBC News 2018).

It is similarly difficult to comprehend the justification or the need for military exercises when rapprochement is in the air. What's more Seoul wants to retain the American security umbrella and its troops, even after the peace treaty with PY. The nuclear armed American naval vessels would continue to patrol in the vicinity of KP. Hitherto DPRK had held its fire, but reacted strongly when Vice President Mike Pence said in a chat with Fox News on 21 May, that the situation with Pyongyang “*may end like Libya*” if KJU doesn't make a deal. (Independent UK, 21 May 2018).

Realising belatedly that CVID was not happening, suddenly on May 24 President Trump called-off the June 12 Singapore summit, without caring to forewarn Seoul or Beijing. In his letter to KJU, Trump blamed PY for displaying ‘*tremendous anger and open hostility*’ towards the US’. He however added that ‘*Someday, I look very much forward to meeting you*’. DPRK's response was swift yet uncharacteristically measured that they were willing to talk “*at any time in any form*”. The following day (May 26) the American President staged yet another U-turn tweeting – ‘*We are having very productive talks with North Korea about reinstating the Summit which, if it does happen, will likely remain in Singapore on the same date, June 12<sup>th</sup>, and, if necessary, will be extended beyond that date*’. Welcome to the Trump world!

### ***Moon-Kim hold 2<sup>nd</sup> summit on May 26***

Stung at being blind-sided by Trump just two days after their own meeting (May 22) in Washington, President Moon instantly agreed to KJU's proposal (on May 25) for another quick summit again at Panmunjeom (but this time on DPRK's soil). Moon and Kim again held fruitful discussions on May 26, notching another welcome first in inter-Korean history. A KCNA statement noted that the two leaders had had a “*candid dialogue*” and that Mr Kim had “*expressed his fixed will on the historic... summit talks (with USA)*”.

An American delegation has since landed in PY for further consultations. It appears KJU has again called the American bluff, underlining that he will not be bullied and will deal with the US only on equal terms. As such, the summit remains quite likely, though there is still a question mark over the date and venue. What is certain is that it will entail gruelling negotiations and deft tight-rope walking by all sides. ■

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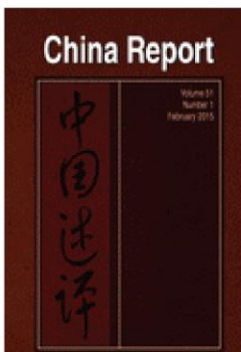


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