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Iran 2.0?

A North Korea nuclear deal, and why the EU belongs at the negotiating table

The security situation on the Korean peninsula is dynamic at the moment - some would say volatile. Everything seems possible: from North Korea's sixth nuclear test, to a US attempt to remove North Korean leader Kim Jong Un from power, to peace negotiations. It is even possible that Europe, whose security role on the Korean peninsula is marginal, could be involved in diplomacy to halt Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme.

A new, progressive government under Moon Jae In has assumed power in South Korea, and it wants to make the most of this new sense of dynamism. After a decade of conservative rule and a hard-line approach to Pyongyang, president Moon is taking his turn at the wheel. He and his cabinet of doves are veterans of the "Sunshine Policy", Seoul's policy of cooperation with North Korea from 1998-2008. They aim to resume the unfinished business of Sunshine's economic and diplomatic engagement. Moon wants talks with Pyongyang - spanning nuclear weapons to Korean unification - and is willing to pay a high price for them.

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Meanwhile, Donald Trump and his advisors are amenable partners in the attempt to re-start negotiations with Pyongyang. Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have dedicated disproportionate time and resources to the North Korea nuclear and missile threat, and have made a peaceful solution to the North Korea crisis a top foreign policy priority. The White House has dispatched top security officials to work with South Korea and Asian regional partners on the Pyongyang problem, and National Security Advisor HR McMaster is trying to ensure the White House and Blue House coordinate closely on North Korea.

North Korea dominated Trump's April summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, and he has invested significant political capital in convincing Beijing to cooperate with the US and its allies in efforts to stop Pyongyang's nuclear programme. North Korea has also been a major theme in meetings between Trump and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe. And it was certainly a main focus of Trump's first, successful meeting with president Moon in late June. Trump is a dealmaker, and seems to prioritise a North Korea agreement as an outcome of the strategy of "maximum pressure and engagement", the administration's dual-track diplomacy emphasising carrots and sticks, but disavowing regime change as a goal. Even more importantly, Trump is a Republican - a disruptive Republican. This gives him the potential to make bold moves with Pyongyang - just as only Nixon could go to China.

Talk to the hand

A crucial question is under what circumstances Pyongyang would be willing to talk. Kim Jong Un is slamming the door in the face of diplomatic overtures. Following Moon's election he has maintained the pace of missile testing, which makes talks politically anathema for Moon and Trump. But Kim's intransigence is partly a pre-negotiation tactic. Trump's administration kicked the sanctions football as far down the pitch as possible before the election of the dovish Moon, establishing the strongest possible negotiating position. Kim's continuing missile tests have a logic dictated by the demands of developing delivery systems for nuclear warheads, but the tests are also a tactical push-back against Trump's "maximum pressure"; Kim's objective is the same as Trump's in this regard - establishing the strongest possible negotiating position. In any event, North Korea will not resist talks forever. Indeed track 1.5 (talks with former and current government officials) and even low-level, track 1 (government to government only) talks have already occurred in secret.

Eventually a combination of acceptable negotiating conditions proffered by the US and South Korea, plus Chinese encouragement and coercion (by implementing calibrated sanctions), will induce Pyongyang to come to the negotiating table. When the time comes - say, just after the 2018 winter Olympics in South Korea - might the accord to halt Tehran's nuclear programme (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) be a model for the process and objective of negotiations with North Korea? That's certainly the view of former US Secretary of State John Kerry, the Cato Institute, and Robert Litwak (formerly of the US National Security Council, now Vice-President of the Wilson Center, an influential Washington think-tank). The idea is that the Iran agreement's

step-by-step dialogue and action combine a transactional approach with the objective of a nuclear freeze are in a way applicable to the North Korea situation.

Rhetoric v. reality

There are reasons to question the logic of this idea, as the Iran case differed in several ways from North Korea: sanctions bite North Korea more lightly, Pyongyang has a powerful neighbouring ally (China), North Korea wants transformational talks (not transactional) leading to a Korea peninsula peace treaty; and there was no South Iran to complicate matters. Still, the Iran model may be the best of a bad set of options, and since taking power the Trump administration has been cautiously optimistic about the JCPOA's results, campaign rhetoric notwithstanding. Indeed, White House officials have told CNN the current administration is in fact "explor[ing] with regional powers the creation of a broader international campaign similar to the Obama administration's global approach on the nuclear deal with Iran."

One overlooked facet of this proposal is that the EU was a crucial actor in the process leading to the JCPOA. Adapting the negotiating model of the Iran deal to the North Korea situation would also involve the EU. There were compelling reasons for the EU to sit at the table with Iran and the P5+1: EU states had strong diplomatic relationships with Tehran (there are no formal US-Iran diplomatic relations), Europe was a major economic partner with Iran (prior to sanctions), the EU was a key player in the sanctions regime that forced Tehran to accept talks, and the other parties largely considered the EU an honest broker. Those same reasons apply in the case of potential negotiations about North Korea's nuclear programme. European countries have better diplomatic reach into North Korea than does Washington (which has no formal diplomatic links with Pyongyang). The EU is a pillar of the international sanctions targeting North Korea, and the EU fits well the role of honest broker (regionally, it has little baggage and no role in the major power competition for hegemony). This is significant, considering the distrust between the likely negotiating axes Pyongyang-Beijing-Moscow and Seoul-Washington-Tokyo.

Parallels between the EU's role in the JCPOA talks and its potential inclusion in negotiations with North Korea are imperfect. Europe is less important to Pyongyang economically, North Korea is more geographically distant, and there is no UN imprimatur on North Korea talks. Moreover, the EU was not party to the previous multi-lateral negotiation process, the Six-Party Talks. That said, the EU has historically taken an economic role in Korean affairs. It was a partner in

the 1990s KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation), and European countries were important secondary trade partners for North Korea (prior to sanctions). The geographic distance factor is attenuated by the fact that Pyongyang proliferates weapons of mass destruction to the Middle East, meaning North Korea's nuclear ambitions represent a security threat to Europe. The fact that Moon Jae In would like the EU involved mitigates the presumption of exclusion of the EU in new negotiations due to its previous absence in the Six-Party Talks. And regardless of whether the Six-Party Talks framework is resuscitated or a different negotiation structure is established, a catalyst is needed to breathe life into North Korean talks. Moon recognises this, as evidenced by his dispatching envoys to diplomatic powers across the globe, including to EU president Donald Tusk. EU officials acknowledge off-the-record that there have already been discussions with the South Korean government and Chinese premier Li Keqiang regarding an EU diplomatic role vis-à-vis North Korea.

One can quibble about the idea of transposing the Iran negotiation model to the Korean peninsula. Nonetheless, regardless of the type of negotiations that come to pass, the EU can and should be involved.



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