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The Moon-Kim overture and the Trump-Kim duet

The historic meeting between the leaders of North and South Korea was inspiring, but the story of peace on the peninsula is only just beginning

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I am on the record as sceptical about the chances for success of the current negotiations addressing the security situation on the Korean peninsula. We have seen versions of this drama before – in 1972, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2005 and 2007 – and each time has ended ignominiously.

Diplomacy and rapprochement are important and necessary, and at the least have reduced the tensions of the 2017 Korean peninsula crisis, but I am concerned by the fact that the new iteration of détente is starting quickly, with summits between South Korean president Moon Jae In, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US president Donald Trump. Beginning at such a high level carries major risks – beyond summits often lie cliffs.

That said, one cannot deny the powerful imagery of the Moon-Kim meeting, broadcast live, around the world, on 27 April 2018. Kim's crossing of the military demarcation line separating North from South was historic; Moon's grace in welcoming his frère ennemi was inspiring; the two leaders' strolling discussion on a footbridge, filmed live without audio, was dramatic. The whole production was fascinating, almost operatic in intensity as day turned to dusk and the two Korean delegations gathered to break bread before Kim's return to Pyongyang.

Beyond the choreography

But an operatic overture is just that, and the duet that follows is the heart of the story hurtling towards fortune or calamity. That duet stands before us, when Trump and Kim meet in May or June. Despite the ardent symbolism of the third inter-Korean summit, the cold, hard eye of logic

must look beyond choreographed theatricality. The reality is that little of substance has changed, implementation of even simple measures has not begun, and we are no closer to understanding a path to a denuclearised North Korea than we were before Moon and Kim planted a peace tree in the DMZ.

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The primary question on the Korean peninsula is to what extent and under what conditions North Korea would be willing to denuclearise. As predicted, this inter-Korean summit did nothing to answer that question. Indeed, North-South wrangling over definitions and details of denuclearisation would have ruined the summit, in the event of disagreement, or led to a Seoul-Washington fissure, if Moon had signed an agreement too injurious to US preferences. The goal of the Moon-Kim meeting was to demonstrate bonhomie, build confidence in diplomacy, and establish momentum and tone for the upcoming Trump-Kim summit, which will focus on the North Korean nuclear weapons programme.

The Panmunjom Joint Declaration barely mentions nuclear weapons, and in fact does so only as a subordinate part of the establishment of a "peace regime" on the Korean peninsula. The North's ballistic missile programme is entirely absent. The Declaration reiterates what we already knew. Pyongyang views denuclearisation as applying to all of the Korean peninsula, which is code for an abrogation of the US nuclear umbrella extending strategic deterrence to South Korea. Given that this condition for North Korea's dismantlement of its nuclear programme and arsenal is unacceptable to the US, it is hard to read the Declaration's denuclearisation passages as anything other than statements that North Korea intends to remain a nuclear armed state.

This is unsurprising, as on 21 April the central committee of North Korea's ruling Worker's Party issued a unilateral nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile *testing*moratorium that most analysts interpret as a reinforcement of North Korea's goal of recognition as a nuclear power. That moratorium conspicuously ignores a nuclear *programme* freeze, as well as medium-/short-range and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Kicking the can down the road

The one reference to denuclearisation seemingly indicates that North Korea would consider it in the context of global nuclear disarmament – i.e. Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty article VI – obligatory for all nuclear weapons states, including the US. This is not the language of a nuclear power prepared to surrender its arsenal. As the 21 April statement clarifies through references to both nuclear weapon reliability and commitment to responsible nuclear policies, including that of nonproliferation to other countries, North Korea is apparently telling the world: "we are a nuclear power now, so get used to it."

Some analysts believe Trump's "maximum pressure" forced Pyongyang's hand; others believe Kim has progressed sufficiently with nuclear arsenal development that he can negotiate from a position of strength.

This is the context in which we should understand the Panmunjom Declaration's reference to "denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula". The problem is that North Korea's conception of denuclearisation has nothing to do with that of the US – a fact well known to the Moon administration, which nonetheless was willing in the Declaration to hedge on the topic, forgo definitional issues and kick that particular can down the road to the Trump-Kim summit.

Official US policy demands that North Korea commit to and implement "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID)" of its entire nuclear programme and arsenal, in accordance with United Nations resolutions. The US-North Korea disaccord on the meaning of denuclearisation is the heart of Trump-Kim negotiations, and one measure of progress for their summit will be how much a presumed joint statement resolves the imprecision of the denuclearisation concept in the Panmunjom Declaration.

An ambitious path to a fantasy goal

The direction of such resolution – North Korea bending toward CVID, or the US settling for less – will help answer a lingering question: why has Kim come to the negotiating table? Some analysts believe Trump's "maximum pressure" forced Pyongyang's hand; others believe Kim has progressed sufficiently with nuclear arsenal development that he can negotiate from a position of strength.

If the former is true, we may see a quick breakthrough on North Korean denuclearisation. If the latter is true, two possibilities present themselves: (a) a deal in which the US de facto recognises North Korea as a nuclear

power through settling for a programme cap-and-freeze; and (b) although less likely, a Trump decision that military strikes against North Korea are necessary. Perhaps, most likely, both factors led Kim to negotiations. In that case we are in for a tedious process involving devilish details on timing and implementation of a compromise agreement that – in a phased process and anchored in a "big package" that includes a "peace regime", inter-Korean rapprochement and loosened sanctions – verifiably caps and freezes the North Korea nuclear programme, with CVID saved for a distant time.

When the curtain rises on Act II of Korean peninsula summitry, we will see whether Trump and Kim hit the right notes to propel this unfolding story forward.

In contrast to the uncertainties of denuclearisation, we have a better idea of what North-South reconciliation should look like, even if the path is ambitious and the stated goal – peninsular peace and eventual national unification – seems like fantasy. Indeed, much of the Panmunjom Declaration's language in this regard stems from past agreements, and the fact that we are still trying to solve the Korean peninsula conundrum speaks volumes about their success.

Pitfalls and progress

Scepticism aside, there is much to like in terms of improved inter-Korean relations and reduced military tensions: high-level and working-group intergovernmental meetings; sports and cultural diplomacy; divided-family reunions; inter-Korean military-military confidence building and phased conventional military de-escalation; peace-building efforts this year and beyond to replace the armistice with a peace treaty; and a follow-up Moon-Kim summit in the autumn. Importantly, the date markers on several of these items will signpost progress.

The Declaration also contains, however, pitfalls both familiar and novel: proscribed "hostile acts" are vague, providing convenient potential grounds for abrogation; veiled references to inter-Korean economic cooperation imply sanctions rollback that may conflict with Washington's timeline; and Japan's exclusion and China's inclusion in the effort to internationalise Korean peninsula security indicates that Beijing is attempting to channel negotiations to its strategic benefit. Possibly there are also unknowns such as unreported side agreements between Moon and Kim.

In sum, the 27 April 2018 summit produced a variably detailed roadmap for three areas: inter-Korean cooperation, reductions in military tension

on the Korean peninsula and the building of a "peace regime", including denuclearisation. Arguably the most critical take-away is that all three areas are connected, and the fact that Moon and Kim seem to have settled on a "big package" approach means that parallel progress in all areas will be required. When the curtain rises on Act II of Korean peninsula summitry, we will see whether Trump and Kim hit the right notes to propel this unfolding story forward.



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