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Trump and Moon in Harmony for Now

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Pundits who are predicting discord over North Korea policy with the newly elected Moon Jae-in government may be in for a surprise. Seoul and Washington seem to be singing from the same hymnal at the moment. While there are ample grounds for skepticism, the United States, South Korea and Japan may all be acting in concert to inch toward dialogue with Pyongyang—one of those rare moments when progress may be possible.

^[1]Why the expectations of discord? A mistaken belief that the Trump administration is tightening sanctions and putting off talks with the North. When the administration disclosed its new policy of “maximum pressure and engagement,”^[1] ^[2] all that pundits seemed to hear was “maximum pressure.” They also wrongly assume President Moon will move swiftly to resume economic engagement regardless of sanctions.



Trump’s Engaging Gestures

While public attention was distracted by the American show of force and talk of tighter sanctions, as well as mixed messages from some top officials, the Trump administration was making several subtle moves to jettison the failed policies of the past and open the way to talks.

For instance, it went ahead with token flood relief for North Korea—the first US humanitarian aid in five years—which President Barack Obama had authorized on his last full day in office.^[2] ^[3]

Even after the successful test-launch of a solid-fueled medium-range ballistic missile, the KN-15, and the assassination of Kim Jong Nam in February, the State Department issued visas for a North Korean delegation led by Choe Son Hui, director-general of American Affairs at the DPRK Foreign Ministry, ostensibly to attend a Track II meeting in New York—again for the first time in five years. However, they withdrew the visas shortly thereafter when it was reported that the cause of Kim Jong Nam’s death was VX nerve agent.^[3] ^[4]

In a break with his predecessors, Trump himself went out of his way to sound exceedingly diplomatic to Kim Jong Un. In a May 1 interview with *Bloomberg News*, after saying that “under the right circumstances I would meet with [Kim],” Trump was remarkably respectful: “If it would be appropriate for me to meet with him, I would absolutely. I would be honored to do it.”^[4] ^[5]

Most significant of all, the administration dropped US insistence that North Korea commit to denuclearization up front before it would enter into talks. In an April 28 interview with NPR, Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson characterized denuclearization as a “goal,” not a condition, for talks: “It is our goal. It is our *only* goal.” He spelled it out, “We have been very clear as to what our objectives are. And equally clear what our objectives are not. And we do not seek regime change, we do not seek a collapse of the regime, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula. We seek a denuclearized Korean Peninsula—and again that is entirely consistent with the objectives of others in the region as well.”^[5] ^[6]

Tillerson told the UN Security Council on April 28 what the administration wants: “North Korea must take **concrete steps to reduce the threat** that its illegal weapons programs pose to the United States and our allies before we can even consider talks.”^[6] ^[7] The North may have already taken the two most concrete steps: no nuclear or ICBM tests.

The mercurial pattern of policy-making in the Trump administration is grounds for caution, but not for ignoring evidence of the course it may be taking.

Sanctions, Schmanctions

What about new sanctions? Amid unbridled enthusiasm for sanctions in the US Congress, Secretary Tillerson told State Department employees on May 3, “We are preparing additional sanctions, **if it turns out North Korea’s actions warrant additional sanctions.**”^[7] ^[8] After President Trump told an April 24 UN Security Council gathering at the White House, “The council **must be prepared to** impose additional and stronger sanctions on North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile programs,”^[8] ^[9] Tillerson chaired an April 28 Security Council session to urge China and others to implement already authorized

sanctions. He proposed just two additional measures: "We call on countries to suspend or downgrade diplomatic relations with North Korea" and "We must levy new sanctions on DPRK entities and individuals supporting its weapons and missile programs, and tighten those that are already in place."^[9]^[10] As he put it on May 3, "So it's a pressure campaign that has a knob on it. I'd say we're at about dial setting 5 or 6 right now, with a strong call of countries all over the world to fully implement the UN Security Council resolutions regarding sanctions, because no one has ever fully implemented those."^[10]^[11] In short, he called for no significant new sanctions for the moment, although Sunday's missile test may lead to a slightly higher setting on the dial.

That is sound policy, given the excessive faith in the efficacy of sanctions in many quarters. A prime example is the US Treasury Department's designation of Banco Delta Asia in Macao as a "primary money-laundering concern" under the USA Patriot Act on September 15, 2005, just as the Six-Party Joint Statement was sent to capitals for final approval. Threatening to invoke Section 311 of the act would deny BDA access to US financial institutions. That set off a run on the bank, prompting Macanese authorities to freeze North Korean accounts. For over a year the North refused to implement the September accord while insisting that Washington resolve the issue bilaterally. After Washington refused to enter such discussions, Pyongyang test-launched seven missiles on July 5, prompting China to vote for a US-backed resolution in the UN Security Council that threatened sanctions. Undaunted, North Korea immediately began preparations for a nuclear test, which it carried out on October 9, 2006. Less than three weeks later, President Bush authorized bilateral talks to resolve the BDA issue.^[11]^[12]

Similarly, in 2009 and 2013 when Washington and Beijing threatened concerted pressure in the UN Security Council, Pyongyang responded with nuclear tests in an effort to drive them apart.

So it was noteworthy that after Beijing and Washington backed stringent UN Security Council sanctions last November, Kim Jong Un, defying widely held expectations that he would soon test a nuclear device or an ICBM, held his fire. He may have done so in anticipation of talks with Washington and a change of government in Seoul.

He made clear that the show of force on both sides was just that—a show. On April 16, at the very height of tensions as North Korea was test-firing missiles and visibly preparing for a nuclear test, satellites detected North Koreans at the Punggye-ri nuclear site playing volleyball. On April 28, a KCNA commentary began, "**The U.S. is bluffing** after firing dozens of missiles at Syria and dropping a GBU-43 bomb on Afghanistan."^[12]^[13]

The Kims' Strategy

Speculation in Washington swirls around how much pressure Beijing might put on Pyongyang. Yet insisting that China must do more ignores North Korean strategy. During the Cold War, Kim Il Sung played off China against the Soviet Union to maintain his freedom of maneuver. In 1988, anticipating the collapse of the Soviet Union, he reached out to improve relations with the United States, South Korea and Japan in order to avoid overdependence on China. That has been the Kims' aim ever since.

From Pyongyang's vantage point, that aim was the basis of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which committed Washington to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations," or, in plain English, end enmity. It was also the gist of the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement in which Washington and Pyongyang pledged to "respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies" as well as to "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula."

For Washington, suspension of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs was the point of these agreements, which succeeded for a time in shuttering the North's production of fissile material and stopping the test-launches of medium and longer-range missiles. Both agreements collapsed, however, when Washington did little to implement its commitment to improve relations and Pyongyang, in turn, reneged on denuclearization.

Probe for a Another Standstill Deal

Kim Jong Un may still be seeking better US relations to reduce his dependence on China. That is why he has yet to conduct a sixth nuclear test or test-launch an ICBM. And just this weekend, a prominent DPRK diplomat publicly reiterated Pyongyang's readiness for talks.^[13]^[14]

Resuming talks with Pyongyang to probe whether another standstill accord is possible is a matter of some urgency. As initial steps, Kim may be willing to suspend his missile and nuclear tests and stop production of fissile material. In return, Washington could scale back joint military exercises in South Korea; reaffirm its commitments in the October 2000 US-North Korea joint communique renouncing "hostile intent" and pledge to build "a new relationship free from past enmity;" commit to respect North

Korean sovereignty and not interfere in its internal affairs; suspend the application of sanctions that predate North Korea's nuclear program; and, after consulting with Seoul, agree to commence a peace process for the Korean Peninsula.

The chances of persuading North Korea to go beyond a temporary freeze to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs are slim without firm commitments from Washington and Seoul to end enmity through political and economic normalization, a peace process to end the Korean War and negotiations on regional security arrangements, among them, a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) that would provide a multilateral legal framework for denuclearization. Trump's willingness to hold out the prospect of a summit meeting with Kim Jong Un would also be a significant inducement.

Moon's Strategic Patience

Kim Jong Un is expecting talks, and so is South Korea's new President Moon Jae-in. As Moon told the *Washington Post* a week before his election, "I believe President Trump is more reasonable than he is generally perceived. President Trump uses strong rhetoric toward North Korea but, during the election campaign, he also said he could talk over a burger with Kim Jong Un. I am for that kind of pragmatic approach to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue."^[14]^[15]

In the meantime, Moon is willing to maintain sanctions and is in no hurry to resume economic engagement. As he said during the campaign, sanctions are necessary but "their goal should be to draw North Korea back to the negotiating table," a slap at Park Guen-hye's push for regime change.^[15]^[16] When Chinese President Xi Jinping made a congratulatory telephone call the day after inauguration, Moon told him that resolving the North Korean nuclear problem has to happen in a "comprehensive, phase-by-phase manner, **with pressure and sanctions applied at the same time as negotiations go on.**"^[16]^[17] He spelled that out in the *Washington Post* interview: "The first stage is for North Korea to not engage in any further nuclear provocations such as additional nuclear tests. The second stage is preventing the North from advancing its nuclear capability any further. Finally, the third stage is for North Korea to completely scrap its program. I think President Trump would agree with these measures."

Moon does not intend to remain on the sidelines while others engage in talks. "I believe we need to be able to take the lead on matters in the Korean Peninsula as the country directly involved," he told the *Washington Post*. "I do not see it as desirable for South Korea to take the back seat and watch discussions between the U.S. and China and dialogues between North Korea and the U.S."^[17]^[18] Yet, like Trump, he conditions his readiness for a summit meeting: "I will meet Kim Jong Un when preconditions of resolving the nuclear issue are assured," he said in his inaugural address. "I think I am on the same page as President Trump."^[18]^[19]

That same day, Moon named Suh Hoon to head the National Intelligence Service, a clear sign he is determined to break with his predecessors' policy of adamant resistance to dialogue. Suh, who spent two years running the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) office in the North and was a key behind-the-scenes player in both North-South summits, met with Kim Jong Il, Kim's father, more often than any other South Korean. "What we need the most is to find a breakthrough for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue," Suh told the *New York Times*. "When such conditions mature, I think we can go to Pyongyang."^[19]^[20]

Moon's swift response to North Korea's most recent test-launch of a new medium-range ballistic missile, the Hwasong-12, underscored his view, "We keep our door open for dialogue with North Korea, but we must act decisively against North Korean provocations so that it will not miscalculate," Moon told his top security officials. He added, "We must show that dialogue is possible when the North changes its attitude."^[20]^[21] That very day, a South Korean delegate to the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing met with his North Korean counterpart to convey the same message.

Potentially more important, Moon appreciates the need to move away from enmity as the key to moving beyond temporary suspension of the North's nuclear programs. In a clear break with President Park, Moon said in his inaugural address, "I will do whatever I can to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula." He also grasps the need to embed inter-Korean relations within a regional framework: "I will provide a turning point to lower tensions on the peninsula by firmly establishing a Northeast Asia peace regime."^[21]^[22]

Moon is a loyal, not subservient ally. He sees the US alliance as the bedrock for engagement with North Korea and China. He was chief of staff to former President Roh Moo-hyun, who dispatched ROK troops to Iraq and negotiated a Korea-US Free Trade Area despite intense opposition from his center-left constituency. He saw THAAD as an inducement for China to put pressure on Pyongyang and was understandably outraged by the hasty deployment. He will review but not likely undo the initial deployment unless talks to suspend North Korean testing succeed, heading off the need for further deployments that are certain to antagonize China.

As the test-launch this past Sunday of a medium-range ballistic missile with a more robust reentry vehicle shows, Kim Jong Un won't wait long for talks to begin. Nor will Moon Jae-in. Delaying talks while US-Chinese pressures intensify could prompt Kim to do more testing, which could eventually lead to a break with Moon. But harmony will prevail as long Trump, hymnal in hand, starts to sing soon.

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[2] [1]: [#_ftn1](#)

[3] [2]: [#_ftn2](#)

[4] [3]: [#_ftn3](#)

[5] [4]: [#_ftn4](#)

[6] [5]: [#_ftn5](#)

[7] [6]: [#_ftn6](#)

[8] [7]: [#_ftn7](#)

[9] [8]: [#_ftn8](#)

[10] [9]: [#_ftn9](#)

[11] [10]: [#_ftn10](#)

[12] [11]: [#_ftn11](#)

[13] [12]: [#_ftn12](#)

[14] [13]: [#_ftn13](#)

[15] [14]: [#_ftn14](#)

[16] [15]: [#_ftn15](#)

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[24] [2]: [#_ftnref2](#)

[25] [3]: [#_ftnref3](#)

[26] [4]: [#_ftnref4](#)

[27] [5]: [#_ftnref5](#)

[28] [6]: [#_ftnref6](#)

[29] [7]: [#_ftnref7](#)

[30] [8]: [#_ftnref8](#)

[31] [9]: [#_ftnref9](#)

[32] [10]: [#_ftnref10](#)

[33] [11]: [#_ftnref11](#)

[34] [12]: [#_ftnref12](#)

[35] [13]: [#_ftnref13](#)

[36] [14]: [#_ftnref14](#)

[37] [15]: [#_ftnref15](#)

[38] [16]: [#_ftnref16](#)

[39] [17]: [#_ftnref17](#)

[40] [18]: [#_ftnref18](#)

[41] [19]: [#_ftnref19](#)

[42] [20]: [#_ftnref20](#)

[43] [21]: [#_ftnref21](#)

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