

Peace on the Korean Peninsula in *The Diplomat* 13 September 2018

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Can North Korea, South Korea and the US successfully negotiate peace on the Korean Peninsula? On the verge of the third, and longest, inter-Korean summit in less than five months and with Pyongyang and Washington discussing a potential second summit, this possibility seems closer than ever before. Yet, there is need for caution. For a peace treaty putting a formal end to the Korean War is as likely as a return to the hostility that defined North Korea-US relations throughout 2017, as we argue in a new report.

North Korea is the key actor to solve the Korean Peninsula conundrum. Pyongyang's authoritarian regime and development of nuclear and missile programmes are the main impediment to a peaceful Korean Peninsula. The main reason behind these programmes is survival. For decades now, North Korea has seen a nuclear deterrent as the only real guarantee against regime change. The fates of Saddam Hussein and, especially, Muammar Qaddafi, were particularly instructive. From Pyongyang's view, both leaders were removed from power and ultimately killed by their own people because they lacked a nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

But there is another potential path towards regime survival. A prosperous, economically vibrant North Korea recognized as an equal partner by the international community would also guarantee Kim Jong-un's power. The examples of China and Vietnam show this. And the US holds the key to both. Thus why Kim is tingling the denuclearization carrot in front of President Donald Trump. The question is whether Pyongyang is sincere about denuclearization. From its perspective, the ideal scenario would be to keep part of its nuclear deterrent while sanctions are slowly removed and investment flows into the country. Ultimately, North Korea would like to be a new India or Pakistan.

South Korea is of course also central to peace in the Korean Peninsula. President Moon Jae-in has been the main catalyst behind the negotiation process unfolding over the past few months. The tangible benefits of a peace declaration or treaty in the Korean Peninsula go beyond inter-Korean reconciliation. Supporting North Korea's economic development would help bring a broader peace regime to the Korean Peninsula. One in which Pyongyang would decide that economic integration with South Korea makes its nuclear deterrent redundant. In the mold of previous liberal leaders, Moon sees talks and economic exchanges as the best way to achieve this outcome. Indeed, there is a question as to whether Seoul is willing to move ahead with its agenda even at the expense of relations with the Trump administration.

The US is the third key vortex in Korean Peninsula peace negotiations. Washington's top priority is clear: final fully verified denuclearization, as the Trump administration puts it. But the road towards this goal would be long, so Washington also seeks short-term gains. Most clearly, the US has openly linked the North Korean nuclear issue to relations with China, including the ongoing trade war between Washington and Beijing. Furthermore, the US does not want to break the alliance with South Korea even if its relationship with North Korea

improves. President Trump might have sent mixed messages regarding the presence of US troops in South Korea, but so far there has been no real indication that the alliance per se is at stake. Considering these range of interests, it is unclear whether Washington is willing to offer Pyongyang real incentives to achieve full denuclearization.

As the diplomatic process continues to unfold in the Korean Peninsula, peace seems within reach. Seoul and Washington insist that Kim is committed to full denuclearization. A security guarantee from the US, also underpinned by China, could well lead to full denuclearization. Economic support from the key actors in Korean Peninsula affairs plus others such as Japan, the IMF or the EU could seal the deal.

Having said that, the current process could end in a total breakdown of relations between the US and the two Koreas. The Trump administration might reach the conclusion that full denuclearization is not on the table. Maximum pressure would thus become its policy of choice to deal with North Korea again. But Seoul, not to mention Beijing, is unlikely to support this scenario. Open disagreement between the US and South Korea would be a real possibility and significantly damage the bilateral alliance.

From our perspective, peace would be the ideal scenario. A more prosperous, denuclearized North Korea would diffuse one of the main security hotspots in Northeast Asia. It would also put an end to the last remnants of the Cold War in the Korean Peninsula. We have to be realistic and it might well be that the Koreas and the US will just muddle along in incremental steps. With Kim, Moon and Trump committed to diplomacy in the Korean Peninsula, however, we should also hope that peace could be achieved.

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