

Big thaw on the Korean peninsula

An unusual charm offensive is under way on the Korean peninsula and the unlikely architect is none other than the North Korean Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un. During the last three months, he has played a deft political hand, a far cry from his rhetorical exchanges with U.S. President Donald Trump. Last year, Mr. Trump was threatening the “Rocket Man” with “fire and fury like the world has never seen”; the North Korean leader described him as a “dotard” and his military called his statement “as a load of nonsense”. Now the two leaders are planning a summit in May which according to Mr. Trump could lead to “the greatest deal in the world”.

Since 2011 when Mr. Kim took over, North Korea has conducted four nuclear tests; the first two were conducted in 2006 and 2009. The sixth test, last September, had a yield more than six times the Hiroshima bomb. He has accelerated the missile programme, conducting nearly 80 tests, compared to an estimated 16 by his father Kim Jong-il between 1994 and 2011.

New Year message

In his New Year address, Mr. Kim conveyed two messages — that the entire U.S. was within range and the nuclear button was on his table, and that he was open to dialogue with Seoul and could send a team to participate in the Winter Olympics being hosted by South Korea in February. Mr. Trump responded by tweeting that his “nuclear button” was “much bigger & more powerful”. But South Korea responded positively and reaffirmed willingness to talk with North Korea at any time and anywhere. Thereafter events gathered pace.

Donald Trump boasts of bigger 'nuclear button' than North Korea's

Mr. Kim’s younger sister Kim Yo-jong attended the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics, with the two Korean teams marching together. She conveyed her brother’s handwritten note to South Korean President Moon Jae-in even as she mesmerised South Korean audiences, and TV channels carried endless discussions about her clothes, hair style and whether she was pregnant.

In early March, a South Korean delegation led by National Security Adviser Chung Eui-yong and intelligence chief Suh Hoon visited Pyongyang to explore the idea of talks. According to the officials, Mr. Kim indicated continuing restraint on nuclear and missile tests (last test was a Hwasong-15 in November with a range of 12,000 km), joking that Mr. Moon would not need to wake up early in the morning for emergency meetings, since North Korean missile tests were normally timed for dawn. According to the South Koreans, “the North Korean side clearly showed willingness on denuclearisation in the Korean peninsula if military threats to North Korea decrease and regime safety is guaranteed”. An April summit between the two Korean leaders was announced, and is now scheduled for April 27 at the Peace House in Panmunjom.

North Korean diplomacy

The two South Korean officials travelled to Washington to brief Mr. Trump on March 8. It was announced that Mr. Trump had agreed to a summit with the North Korean leader in May.

In a first, Trump to meet Kim in May

This will be the first summit meeting between the U.S. and North Korea. Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton have travelled to Pyongyang in 1994 and 2009, respectively, to meet Mr. Kim’s grandfather and father, respectively, but after their terms as U.S. President ended. There have been two earlier summits between the Korean leaders, in 2000 and 2007, though the outcomes proved to be

shortlived. Mr. Moon has also mooted the idea of a trilateral summit though there has been no reaction to it from Pyongyang or Washington. In another surprise move, the North Korean leader, accompanied by his wife Ri Sol-ju, travelled by train to Beijing on March 25. It was Mr. Kim's first foreign trip since he took over in 2011. Though described as an unofficial visit, it had the trappings of a state visit, complete with a guard of honour and a banquet with Chinese President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan at the Great Hall of the People. The North Korean leader assured Mr. Xi that if South Korea and the U.S. responded with goodwill and took phased, synchronised measures, the issue of denuclearisation of the peninsula could reach resolution.

China has long been North Korea's political ally and economic lifeline, accounting for 90% of North Korea's foreign trade. It has often resisted tightening of sanctions that could lead to the collapse of the regime. However, relations between the two countries have soured since 2013 when Jang Song Thaek, Mr. Kim's uncle who was responsible for managing the China relationship, was purged. Missile tests when China was hosting the G20 summit in 2016 and the Belt and Road Forum in 2017 together with a nuclear test during the BRICS summit in 2017 were embarrassments for China. As sanctions tightened under successive UN Security Council resolutions, North Korea blamed China for 'dancing to the tune' of the U.S.

The special visitor from Pyongyang

However Mr. Kim realises that he needs help to handle U.S. pressure. His China visit acknowledges Mr. Xi's extension in power beyond 2022; and for China, it reflects its pivotal role in any negotiations regarding North Korea. Mr. Xi has sent a personal message to Mr. Trump about his meeting with Mr. Kim while Politburo member Yang Jiechi is being despatched to Seoul. In Washington, recent appointments of John Bolton as National Security Adviser and Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State, both hardliners, raise the stakes for North Korea.

Reconciling objectives

Mr. Kim's objectives are clear — securing regime legitimacy, regime security and sanctions relief. A summit with Mr. Trump provides legitimacy as long as it begins a dialogue process leading towards diplomatic recognition. In 1992, despite North Korean reservations, China recognised South Korea and today it is one of the South's largest partners and a major investment source. How South Korea and the U.S. deal with the move towards recognition will demand political creativity.

Kim 'deeply moved' by South Korean K-pop concert

Having achieved a certain threshold in its nuclear and missile capabilities, North Korea can afford a pause in testing in return for sanctions relief but 'denuclearisation' will only happen at the end of a long-drawn process which will involve discussions regarding the U.S. nuclear umbrella for South Korea, the presence of 23,500 American troops and converting the 1953 armistice into a peace treaty which will guarantee regime security.

South Korea would like to ensure that it has a veto over U.S. decisions regarding North Korea and gaining operational control over its own military forces, both of which will require protracted negotiations. Meanwhile, Mr. Moon will do his utmost to maintain credibility in Washington and Pyongyang to keep his 'sunshine policy' on track. In Europe, the two Germanys recognised each other in 1972 (the U.S. recognised East Germany in 1974) as part of Willy Brandt's 'ostpolitik', long before German unification was achieved in 1990.

North Korea's aggressive testing provided justification for the deployment of the THAAD missile defence system aggravating Chinese concerns. China would prefer lowering tensions though it is

in no hurry to see Korean unification.

The big unknown is Mr. Trump's idea of what is an acceptable 'deal'. Will a process towards eventual denuclearisation tempt him or will he reject it as 'fake news' and revert to relying on sanctions and military pressure as some of his advisers are inclined to? Major compromises will be needed for reconciling interests of all the key players for the high stakes summitry on the Korean peninsula to succeed.

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