

Dacey détente

The June 12 Singapore summit promises to build on the unfolding rapprochement between the U.S. and North Korea. Three distinct departures from an otherwise consistently hawkish stance are discernible in U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement last week of the rescheduled meeting with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. The first is the relegation of the core tenet of the U.S. administration's policy on North Korea's nuclear programme. Denuclearisation has in effect been shelved. The significance of this shift becomes apparent when contrasted with the U.S.'s earlier unease with the lack of detail on the specifics of the North's offer to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula.

Reinforcing the new stance perhaps was also the absence of President Trump's top officials at the Oval Office meeting on June 1 with Pyongyang's principal envoy and nuclear negotiator. Neither Vice President Mike Pence, nor National Security Adviser John Bolton were present at the meeting with Kim Yong-chol, the first official from North Korea since 2000 to be invited to the White House and only the second to meet a sitting U.S. President. Mr. Pence and Mr. Bolton have in recent weeks openly suggested that the path ahead for Pyongyang would be based on the model adopted by Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi. Qaddafi, in 2004, relinquished his nuclear programme in exchange for economic integration with the West. However, considering Qaddafi's killing in the 2011 uprising, backed by Western powers, this entire scenario has been viewed by the North Korean government as the wrong example to emulate. Thus, recent references to the Libyan parallel pushed Pyongyang to issue repeated threats to pull out of the Singapore summit, even before Mr. Trump actually called it off.

A second signal of the current view is Washington's unwillingness to exert "maximum pressure" for complete dismantlement. It now recognises the need for a long-drawn process of dialogue to precede total disarmament. After meeting Pyongyang's envoy, Mr. Trump acknowledged explicitly that there would have to be many such rounds to achieve the desired outcome.

A third example is Mr. Trump's assurance not to impose further sanctions, while emphasising that existing measures against Pyongyang would remain in place. Obtaining relief from crippling international sanctions, while retaining the nuclear deterrent developed over the decades, was Mr. Kim's real objective. In return, Pyongyang may cease further nuclear tests and missile launches, an idea favoured by both China and Russia.

A tangible result from the summit tomorrow could be a formal treaty to proclaim the end of the 1950-1953 Korean War. The dialogue could possibly commence a process leading to recognising Pyongyang as a nuclear weapons state.

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