

U.S.-North Korea: a deal that can be done

The whirlwind U.S.-North Korean bromance hit a temporary roadblock last week. If American President Donald Trump's [decision to open direct talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un](#) a few months ago came as a surprise, last Thursday's [dramatic somersault to pull the plug on a summit](#) that could have ushered in a transformed Northeast Asia will not leave too many scratching their heads. After all, Mr. Trump's foreign policy since the outset of his administration has swayed erratically between his own pragmatism and the hawkish elements in the larger security establishment. At almost every stage, we have seen Mr. Trump succumb to the default worldview inside his administration and across the broader political spectrum.

If we accept the proposition that Mr. Trump remains stifled in a national security system still largely dominated by the traditionalists, the question then turns to what the calculus is of the policymakers really playing the strings. The traditionalists, in essence, fear change. Having been accustomed to a unipolar moment — fleeting as it was — when the U.S. held sway over all geopolitical and geoeconomic matters, the changes in the past decade have come as a psychological shock to this self-belief in global preponderance. Mounting evidence of an emerging multipolar world and waning of American relative strength should have prompted a strategic reassessment of the U.S.'s role in the world. Instead, the establishment, despite a popular domestic revolt in the 2016 U.S. presidential election that catapulted Mr. Trump to office, has scoffed at any meaningful adjustment to the global balance of power.

North Korea's search for state security and regime survival is well known. Nuclear weapons, as in most other cases, were deemed the only reliable card to security. Since 2006, when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea's official name) conducted its first nuclear test, the process of nuclearisation saw sustained progress over a decade along with ballistic missile testing to demonstrate a path towards a credible deterrence capacity. But it was not until the July 2017 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test that Washington awoke to the reality of its own homeland being part of a deterrence equation with Pyongyang. The North Koreans shrewdly realised that only the possibility of a direct threat would stir the U.S. into serious talks. And it seemed to work. For after the usual "fire and fury" charade, Washington responded positively to the prospect of a nuclear deal.

US-North Korea talks: A breakthrough and a gamble

The DPRK, for its part, was actively encouraged by its great power benefactors to pursue such an opening. As direct neighbours of the DPRK, both Russia and China have a self-interest in stabilising the Korean peninsula and closing an unfinished chapter of the Cold War. South Korean domestic politics too was geared to tap this moment. In short, the regional context was conducive at all levels for a détente and bargaining process to ensue.

The contours of a deal remain viable. Pyongyang would cease its quest for intercontinental nuclear weapons capability in lieu of a gradual normalisation of ties with the U.S. along with a lifting of multilateral economic sanctions. As a result, the DPRK would gain regime and national legitimacy, assurance of survival and an opportunity to economically transform itself. The U.S. could also claim success on several fronts. A deal would confine the DPRK to a regional nuclear power, which also enables Pyongyang to preserve a degree of autonomy from Beijing; it would stabilise the broader Northeast Asian setting and thereby increase the security of its two key allies, South Korea and Japan; and finally, it would eliminate a major potential flashpoint in China-U.S. relations. Such outcomes hardly seem adverse for the US.

Much attention has also been drawn to the mutually incompatible bargaining postures: the U.S.'s

maximalist position of complete de-nuclearisation versus the DPRK's bottom line, which probably reserves the right to retain an undefined level of nuclear weapon capability as an insurance measure of last resort. The issue, however, runs much deeper. The traditionalists in the U.S. establishment fear a shifting status quo that might produce new regional re-alignments or interdependent equations that gradually diminish the cohesiveness of U.S. military alliances in East Asia. For example, it is likely that China and Russia would actively leverage peace on the peninsula to pursue their ambitious geoeconomic plans for the region. Koreans on both sides of the Demilitarised Zone would be spoilt for choice after living under the shadow of prolonged tension and conflict. Put plainly, in the image of an American hawk, successful U.S.-DPRK talks translate to the U.S. no longer being the top dog in Northeast Asia and being compelled to share power and influence with others. But this is precisely what a multipolar world will look like in the foreseeable future.

The rhetoric from both sides suggests that the window for talks remains wide open. Even as he called off the summit on May 24, Mr. Trump maintained a high measure of respect for Mr. Kim and spoke about how a "wonderful dialogue was building up" between the two leaders and that he "very much" looked forward to meeting Mr. Kim in the future. In his oral remarks, Mr. Trump closed by intriguingly hinting that the "existing summit could take place or at a future date". The DPRK's response the following day was equally effusive in portraying Mr. Trump as a rousing advocate for change. Pyongyang has drawn a sharp distinction between a "bold" Mr. Trump who dared to tread in a new direction and his hardline advisers. Not mincing its words, the DPRK had previously expressed a "feeling of repugnance" towards National Security Adviser John Bolton and described Vice President Mike Pence as a "political dummy". Echoing Mr. Trump, Pyongyang concluded its May 25 statement by expressing "an intent to sit with the U.S." in any format "at any time", prompting Mr. Trump to welcome the "warm and productive statement" that could "lead, hopefully to long and enduring prosperity and peace."

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