

Untangling Northeast Asia's "Abnormal Equilibrium": Why Seoul Believes that Peace with Pyongyang is Possible

by Claudia Astarita

Northeast Asia is at a crossroads. One road leads to peace, stability and shared economic development, the other to deepening bilateral tensions, an arms race and the potential for mutual destruction.

Using history and geopolitics as guideposts, one may believe that the latter road will be taken. However, a systematic overview of developments in the Korean Peninsula over the last 12 months seems to confirm that an "abnormal equilibrium" is slowly taking shape, holding out a potential to modify intra-state relations in the area.

A year of continuous nuclear and intercontinental missile tests ended with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un handing a rare and unexpected olive branch to the country's southern neighbour, promising to send a North Korean delegation to the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang in February 2018. In his annual New Year's Day address, Kim Jong-un linked this

proposal to a broader commitment to work with Seoul to find a "peaceful resolution with our southern border".¹

What happened next is well known: the Olympic euphoria culminated in new rounds of talks, including the first face to face meeting between North and South Korean leaders in a decade. According to scholars at the Asan Institute for Political Studies, these developments confirm that Northeast Asia is working on a "new abnormal equilibrium aimed at enabling the region to overcome history and geopolitics while economically binding Asian countries together".²

This "new equilibrium" will only work if North Korea is allowed to play a constructive role in the regional architecture. The idea that Asian

¹ Alanne Orjoux and Steve George, "Kim Jong Un Offers Rare Olive Branch to South Korea", in *CNN*, 2 January 2018, <http://cnn.it/2q6c1ua>.

² Author's interview at Asan Institute for Political Studies, Seoul, 20 March 2018.

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stability depends on the ability to fully integrate Pyongyang in the region is becoming more and more popular in South Korean policy circles.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is himself a strong supporter of North Korean engagement. Born into a family of North Korean refugees', he belongs to a generation that still perceives North and South Koreans as brothers. During an interview with the author, a South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs officer linked Moon's determination to bring the North Korean crisis to an end to three priorities.

First, a personal vision of co-existence as the only sustainable strategy to achieve peaceful unification. Second, concern that the increasingly unpredictable behaviour of the United States and China under Donald Trump and Xi Jinping could be curtailed only by transforming South Korea into a key player in the negotiations on the Peninsula. Third, the belief that time would soon become ripe for Kim Jong-un to initiate a constructive dialogue with his Southern counterpart.³

The Ministry of Unification in Seoul seems persuaded that a final solution for the Korean crisis is within reach. The reasons for this unusual optimism are not necessarily linked to the expected outcomes of the forthcoming meetings between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in on 27 April and between the North Korean leader and Donald Trump, which according to the latest reports should take place in a still undisclosed

location before the end of May. "Both meetings will certainly help us make several steps forward", commented an officer of the Ministry of Unification during an interview in Seoul, "but our optimism is grounded on a series of signals that are coming directly from the North".⁴

The same officer confirmed that there are four major dynamics that have strengthened the credibility of Kim Jong-un's "peaceful messages". The first is linked to his shrinking legitimacy. "Kim Jong-un is the 'lucky bastard' that is enjoying his life thanks to his privileged background. To regain his people's trust and respect he needs to do something big. From his perspective, giving North Korea a nuclear status was a great move. But now he needs to deliver in terms of people's livelihood".⁵

Two further rationales have been advanced. Pyongyang has increased the level of control at the borders with China and South Korea with the aim of minimizing defections. As explained by a South Korean scholar specialised in refugees' studies, "defectors represent a terrible loss of face for the regime", and this is the reason why border operations have become sharper.⁶ The same development is confirmed by an army officer at the South Korean Ministry of Defence; "Today we do not see anybody behind the [border] fence. After the news of the North Korean soldier who fled across the border into

³ Author's interview at South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Seoul, 19 March 2018.

⁴ Author's interview at South Korean Ministry of Unification, Seoul, 21 March 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Author's interview with a South Korean scholar based at Sogang University, Seoul, 21 March 2018.

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the South while being shot at by his former comrades became global in December 2017, Pyongyang instructed its army officers to remain inside their camp to avoid another embarrassing situation".⁷

Another officer working for the Ministry of Unification also pointed to cracks in Kim Jong-un's legitimacy among North Korean officers. "I have been working in this Ministry for more than 30 years and I have talked to dozens of North Korean officers. In the '90s, they were deeply convinced that they were living in the best country in the world and their leader was their god. Today, they have lost all their enthusiasm, but they know that they need to remain compliant and submissive if they want to stay alive".⁸

The last dynamic that has contributed to a changing image of the North Korean leader in Seoul, is Kim Jong-un's ambition to become a respected protagonist of the international chessboard. "Kim Jong-un is actively participating to the negotiating process", confirmed a South Korean diplomat. "He started investing on 'Korean brotherhood', to show both China and the United States that he could have solved the crisis himself. He then proved China that the 'special relationship' they used to have was over by side-lining Beijing during the very first stage of the negotiating process".⁹

⁷ Author's interview at South Korean Ministry of Defence, Seoul, 23 March 2018.

⁸ Author's interview at South Korean Ministry of Unification, Seoul, 21 March 2018.

⁹ Author's interview at South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Seoul, 19 March 2018.

Then, when Seoul and Washington were almost sure they would be the sole protagonists of a possible breakthrough with Pyongyang, Kim Jong-un surprised everyone by meeting Xi Jinping in China. "Kim Jong-un can fool all his interlocutors even while under the toughest regime of sanctions his country ever experienced, he is the real winner here", added the South Korean officer.

If Kim Jong-un is the winner, then why does Seoul appear to trust him? "North Korea is a very ambitious country, but Kim is aware he will not achieve much by relying on himself. He wants to stay in power, so he is ready to compromise on a good bargaining chip", noted an officer from the South Korean Ministry of Defence, "and we are confident because it will be up to us to identify the good chip to offer".¹⁰

Kim Jong-un does not trust either China or the United States. He talks to both in order to make sure that Washington and Beijing do not end up defining a mutual strategy on Northeast Asia that excludes North Korean interests.

By keeping them away from the Peninsula, and striving for an "abnormal equilibrium" in which a nuclear North Korea coexists and cooperates with South Korea, the leaders in Seoul and Pyongyang are seeking to guarantee peace and stability on both sides of the border while sidelining – to the extent that it is possible – their two major external allies, whose respective interests do not necessarily match

¹⁰ Author's interview at South Korean Ministry of Defence, Seoul, 23 March 2018.

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those of the two Koreas.

Achieving a compromise on the Korean Peninsula is not going to be easy. The stakes are high, and differently from the past, Pyongyang is not going to assume a remissive position. Until a couple of weeks ago, it seemed evident that it would have been up to the United States to set the terms of the negotiations, proposing a satisfying mixture of economic and technology transfers in exchange for denuclearization. But since Kim Jong-un met Xi Jinping in China, the strategic setting has changed again. By reengaging Beijing in the negotiations, Pyongyang has further increased its leverage and challenged Washington's preeminence in the region. As a consequence, the ball is now back in Seoul's court.

South Korea is probably the only country with the expertise and the genuine commitment to set the terms of a realistic and sustainable agreement with the North. If a roadmap for peace will be defined during the forthcoming meeting between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in it means that stability is really on the horizon for the Korean Peninsula. It will then be up to Donald Trump and Xi Jinping to validate and support such a roadmap, yet the key impetus for such movement will have come from North and South Korea, not the great powers of the US and China. This dynamic, may itself reflect the changing nature of the international system and could indicate some hope that a genuine breakthrough is on the horizon.

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