

The Hobbled Peacemaker: America's Inability to Satisfy North Korea

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ABSTRACT

The United States (US) cannot reach an agreement with North Korea because US domestic politics will not support the magnitude of concessions that would be required to turn Pyongyang into a denuclearised yet satisfied regional power. While domestic constraints on the US side are not the only (or even the primary) reason for the non-materialisation of a peace agreement between the US and North Korea, they are an overlooked contributing factor. If future attempts are made to mollify the North Korean regime, they will have to be instigated by US regional allies, with Washington playing a supporting role at most.

KEYWORDS

United States; North Korea; East Asia; nuclear non-proliferation; diplomacy

Is there a diplomatic pathway for the United States (US) to bring about lasting peace and denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula? If so, what would Washington have to offer North Korea to convince the regime that giving up its nuclear weapons capability is worth the exchange? And what would be the domestic reaction in the US to a grand bargain with Pyongyang? In this article, we take the Trump Administration's opening to North Korea as a starting point for answering these questions. We treat President Donald Trump's diplomatic efforts to engage his counterpart Kim Jong-un, which began in March 2018 and ended without success in mid-2020, as a good-faith effort to disarm North Korea via the provision of other benefits prized by the regime: diplomatic recognition, economic relief and security guarantees. In the event, Trump's bid to appease North Korea failed.¹ We argue that an underappreciated part of the reason for this failure is that domestic actors inside the US would never have agreed to pay the full price of Pyongyang's denuclearisation, which, we suspect, placed tight constraints on what President Trump could practicably offer during negotiations. We suggest that domestic hurdles to a US-North Korean rapprochement have existed since the early 1990s and have strengthened over the

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¹We use the verb 'appease' as synonymous with 'satisfy'. Following Stephen F. Rock (2000, 12), we maintain that, properly understood, appeasement can be defined as "the policy of reducing tensions with one's adversary by removing the causes of conflict and disagreement", and "is not incompatible with compromise, reciprocity, and mutual accommodation. It does not require that one make unilateral concessions". From this perspective, it is possible to imagine in the abstract a bargain between Washington and Pyongyang that would result in a satisfied (appeased) yet denuclearised North Korean state. In this article, however, we argue that any such bargain would be impossibly difficult for US leaders to negotiate and implement in practical terms.

past three decades. In the absence of significant changes at the level of US domestic politics, future attempts to turn North Korea into a satisfied yet denuclearised power will be prone to meet the same end as Trump's failed outreach – if not because North Korea is unappeasable then because of structural constraints that hobble the US as a credible peacemaker in the Korean Peninsula.

The conventional wisdom is that the biggest barriers to a US-North Korean grand bargain exist on the North Korean side of the equation (for example, Pacheco Pardo 2021; Terry 2021). We do not challenge this received opinion. Indeed, we agree that intransigence by Pyongyang can be considered a sufficient explanation for why a lasting agreement over denuclearisation has never been achieved. In truth, the failure of US and North Korean leaders to reach such an agreement is likely overdetermined. Our point here is merely that US politics should be considered an additional set of factors that prevent the conclusion of a comprehensive agreement on denuclearisation. We argue that there is analytical value in understanding the extent and implications of these constraints, so that policy-makers can more fully grasp what would have to change for North Korea to accept a future without nuclear weapons.

Our argument is difficult to test. How can we know the exact terms that would be required for Pyongyang to accept denuclearisation? The simple answer is that we cannot, because such an outcome has never been observed and because North Korea is an opaque regime that has puzzled outsiders for decades. Similarly, how can we know for sure whether actors in US domestic politics would reject a grand bargain with North Korea if ever presented with such an option? Again, the answer is that we cannot; the US political system has never been tested in this way. Instead, we provide an argument – a provocation – meant to inspire an honest reckoning of whether the US would truly be capable of appeasing North Korea even under conditions of Pyongyang being receptive to a bargain over denuclearisation. Our own conjecture is that US domestic politics would not be able to bear such a settlement – at least, not over the long term.

We proceed from the simple assumption that governments are only ever amenable to dropping their most contentious foreign policies – in North Korea's case, the nuclear weapons programme – when they can be convinced of enjoying continued security at home and abroad. This means that, at a minimum, North Korea must be granted a credible expectation of freedom from both external threats and domestic challenges if it is to be persuaded that denuclearisation is a safe and attractive path forward. We expect that these are guarantees no US leader could provide without incurring severe political costs at home. Indeed, the expected punishments – political, electoral, reputational – that would flow from 'appeasing' North Korea are so severe that US leaders are deterred from even considering an approach that could be construed in such terms. If we are right, the implication is that the US has few practicable options at its disposal for turning North Korea into an amiable ('satisfied') yet denuclearised regional power. US leaders are too constrained by domestic politics to play an orchestrating role in North Korea's denuclearisation. Our conclusion is that lasting peace and nuclear disarmament on the Korean Peninsula, if at all possible, will require multilateral solutions headed by more agile international actors than Washington.

Problems of domestic politics

Political scientists have long recognised that domestic politics can place constraints on what leaders are able to achieve in negotiations with foreign states (for example, Putnam 1988). In the case of the US, the constraints imposed by domestic politics seem to have tightened in recent years, weakening the ability of sitting presidents to enact programmatic foreign policies and, in particular, to negotiate lasting diplomatic agreements with US adversaries (Schultz 2017, 14-5). There is no single factor that accounts for the hobbling of US foreign policy in this way. Rather, obstacles to impede the development and implementation of enduring international policies inhere across the spectrum of the US political system (Trubowitz and Harris 2019).

Even so, William Walldorf and Andrew Yeo (2019) are persuasive when they argue that there is a specific set of factors that inhibit US presidents from pursuing foreign policies of “restraint” in particular. That is, while it might be difficult for US presidents to implement any sort of programmatic foreign policy in the contemporary era (Trubowitz and Harris 2019, 637), they must fight an especially steep uphill battle whenever they try to develop a foreign policy vision aimed at the “narrow pursuit of national interests that reduces global military commitments and downplays remaking the world in the US image” (Walldorf and Yeo 2019, 9). According to Walldorf and Yeo, any such policy proposals will run up against the challenges of partisanship, a national identity that emphasises the promotion of US values abroad through force if necessary, and powerful political pressures to avoid ‘looking soft’ before domestic audiences.

The problem of hyper-partisanship in contemporary US politics is well documented. According to conventional measures, the two US political parties are now further apart in terms of ideology than at any time in the post-World War II era (Schultz 2017, 18). With bipartisanship in the US Congress hard to come by, recent presidents have found it difficult to enact ambitious international agendas (Trubowitz and Harris 2019, 623-7). What is more, those foreign policies that are put in place are often vulnerable to turn-overs in leadership (Schultz 2017, 15). President Trump’s decision to renege on US commitments made by President Obama under the Iran nuclear deal is an obvious case in point.

Even if proponents of diplomatic solutions to international problems are able to overcome the challenge of hyper-partisanship at home, Walldorf and Yeo (2019) argue that they often struggle to make their ideas consonant with prevailing narratives of US power and purpose. As Charles Kupchan (2018) argued, the US now broadly accepts an exceptionalist story about itself that stresses the importance of interventionism and imagined omnipotence. Proposals for strategic retrenchment, the appeasement of adversaries or the downsizing of alliance commitments – in other words, to ‘do less’ in foreign affairs – are incongruous with this prevailing set of ideas, which, while not quite hegemonic, is deeply embedded in the US political class and voting public. President Trump’s plan to withdraw troops from northern Syria in 2019, for example, provoked a torrent of criticism from domestic actors who viewed the abandonment of US Kurdish allies as tantamount to abandoning core US values (Chappell and Gonzales 2019). President Biden’s decision to exit Afghanistan was viewed in a similar light – that is, a betrayal of US allies, a blow against

democracy and human rights, and a shameful admission of American impotence and irresolution (Sprunt 2021).²

Finally, Walldorf and Yeo (2019, 49) point to the “problem of looking soft” in foreign policy. This is a difficult phenomenon to pinpoint in empirical terms. But of course, it is conventional wisdom that presidents and lawmakers alike have a compelling desire to avoid charges of weakness in foreign policy, especially when it comes to national security issues. From Lyndon Johnson’s expansion of the Vietnam War to George H. W. Bush’s insistence that Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait would “not stand” to Barack Obama’s emphasis on counterterrorism, it seems obvious (and intuitive) that US leaders face acute structural pressures to deny their political opponents and critics any opportunity to raise charges of weakness – pressures that are so severe, in fact, that presidents and their advisers are often pushed toward militaristic solutions even when diplomatic options might stand a greater chance of success (Nincic 2011).

Our point is not that these barriers – partisanship, a national identity that stresses interventionism and (by extension) militarism, and political incentives to look ‘tough’ on national security – will always stymie diplomacy, whether in the North Korean case or any other. But we do agree with Walldorf, Yeo and others that the US political system is ill-configured to support the diplomatic resolution of disputes with America’s most vilified adversaries. Simply put, the US is biased against accepting negotiated settlements to contentious issues. While not altogether impossible or unthinkable, such diplomatic solutions to the US’ most pressing international challenges are hard to make stick. This is evident in the case of North Korea.

Appeasing North Korea

Can North Korea be made satisfied with its international position such that it no longer views it necessary to maintain a nuclear weapons capability? The answer to this question depends on whether the US can (i) articulate specific demands of the North Korean regime and (ii) construct the external and domestic conditions that would persuade North Korea’s leaders that they would be more satisfied (secure) if they acceded to these demands than not. History suggests that it is the second of these tasks – the formulation of a credible plan for providing North Korea with external and internal security – that poses challenges for Washington. US leaders have had no difficulty articulating what they want from North Korea: complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation (Keating 2018). But persuading Pyongyang to accept this fate has posed an intractable set of problems. We focus on one set of problems here: namely, domestic constraints on US leaders’ willingness and ability to pay the high costs that would be associated with compensating Pyongyang for the abandonment of its nuclear weapons programme.

²These criticisms had tangible consequences. President Trump suffered the resignation of his well-respected Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, in response to the decision to withdraw from northern Syria, as well as condemnations from lawmakers in his own party. President Biden experienced a significant drop in his approval rating amid the tumultuous Afghan exit, with some members of Congress even calling for his resignation or removal from office.

Incredible commitments: the challenge of reassuring North Korea

Efforts to convert Pyongyang into a satisfied and non-threatening regional power must begin from the understanding that North Korea occupies a position of wide-ranging and chronic insecurity. The regime is treated as a pariah by most of the international community and is subject to numerous economic sanctions.³ There is also a well-armed neighbour to the south, with whom North Korea is technically still at war. North Korea is in close proximity to Japan, a historical colonial power, which today boasts one of the most powerful militaries in the world and with whom Pyongyang has extremely poor relations. North Korea's one ally in the region, China – also a historical imperial power, has periodically indicated impatience with the regime's behaviour (Mastro 2018; Li and Kim 2020). And perhaps most troubling of all from Pyongyang's perspective is the fact of extremely bad relations with the world's only current super-power, the US.

North Korea cannot be expected to voluntarily pursue denuclearisation if doing so would worsen its (already unenviable) security position. The question, then, is whether North Korea can be persuaded that denuclearisation would serve its long-term security needs. How could this be achieved? At the very least, it would require the US to give a credible commitment that its military would never be used against North Korea in the future. This is easier said than done. North Korea's leaders remember that, twenty years ago, a US president used a speech to Congress to place North Korea in an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran (CNN 2002). Iraq was invaded just one year after that speech, while military action against Iran has long been mooted in US policy circles. Officials in Pyongyang also know what happened to Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, who abandoned his weapons of mass destruction programmes at the behest of the US and its allies beginning in 2003, only to be overthrown and killed in a US-backed revolution in 2011. It would not be unreasonable for North Korea's leaders to conclude that they, too, might be in the crosshairs of the US military – or would one day become so – should they lose their nuclear deterrent.

How could the US convince North Korea that nuclear disarmament would not be seen in Washington as an invitation to pursue regime change? One possibility would be to withdraw US troops from South Korea (and perhaps elsewhere in East Asia) with a view to reassuring leaders in Pyongyang that their external security would not be threatened by Washington. Indeed, President Trump considered exactly such a move in 2018 (before his diplomatic opening to North Korea) and again in 2020, even going so far as to ask his top military advisers to present options for reducing troop numbers in South Korea (Klimas and Morgan 2018; Gordon and Lubold 2020). Trump, however, was severely criticised in domestic politics – by the opposing party, by members of his own party and by prominent members of the commentariat – for even considering such a move, suggesting that future US presidents would have to be willing to pay a heavy reputational cost if they ever chose to actually follow through on such a drawdown of forces (Klimas and Morgan 2018).

Another option to reassure North Korea would be to refashion the security architecture in East Asia such that it appears less threatening from Pyongyang's perspective. If the

³As Rüdiger Frank (2018) notes, North Korea has been subjected to one form of sanctions regime or another ever since its founding.

US and China were to issue a joint declaration on peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, for example, then this might help to reduce Pyongyang's fears of external intervention while also serving to cement relations between Washington and Beijing. Japan and South Korea might also be persuaded to unilateral undertakings to guarantee North Korea's security, or else amend their bilateral security agreements with the US to provide reassurance for Pyongyang. Of course, it is unlikely that a reconfigured security framework alone would be enough to transform North Korea's external environment into anything approaching a zone of tranquillity – but it is also true that the historical treatment of North Korea as a rogue state “severely hinders both an adequate understanding and a possible resolution of the [nuclear] crisis” (Bleiker 2003, 721; see also Kang 1995). Bringing North Korea into a common regional security community – although not an easy thing to do – might yield better results (Easley 2019).

However, it must be emphasised that these theoretical possibilities for assuaging North Korea's security concerns are just that: theoretical. At least, we are highly sceptical that domestic actors in the US would ever accept such concessions to Pyongyang as the price of peace and denuclearisation.⁴ During 2018-2020, domestic actors on the right and the left – in Congress, the media and in civil society (the so-called ‘Blob’) – made no secret of their opposition to Trump's periodic suggestions that US alliances in East Asia might have to be compromised to facilitate peace with North Korea. Kelly Magsamen of the Center for American Progress, now Chief of Staff to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, accused Trump of a “disturbing pattern of undermining our democratic alliances while praising our adversaries” (cit. in Borger 2018). Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation spoke for many when he argued that Trump's view of US alliances was “counter to the U.S. post-World War II strategy that sees allies as in our strategic interests. Keeping U.S. troops forward deployed can deter America's opponents from doing bad things and allow U.S. troops to respond more quickly” (cit. in Gordon and Lubold 2020).

Trump was an aberrational president in the sense that domestic support for his foreign policy did not rely on a compelling narrative about the essential ‘goodness’ of his international agenda. He was uniquely willing to brush aside criticisms of his foreign policy, even appearing to revel in accusations that he was unsentimental about America's alliances. However, the same may not be true of future presidents and is not currently true for members of Congress or the public at large, who are mostly committed to a version of US national identity that stresses a values-based foreign policy (Walldorf and Yeo 2019, 29-30). Moreover, even Trump could not fully escape the attachment to alliances that pervades US domestic politics: his diplomatic overtures towards North Korea provoked stiff rebukes in the Republican-controlled US Senate, and at least one of his chief advisers, John Bolton, is reported to have undermined Trump's efforts to conclude a bilateral peace with North Korea (Fifield 2018).

The problem is that anything less than a complete withdrawal from East Asia – a non-starter in US politics, not least of all because it would undercut the wider (emerging) ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy (White House 2022) – would leave North Korea unable to take US security assurances at face value. After all, North Korea need look no further than

⁴Nor would the US' regional allies. Although the interests of US allies are not our focus here, it is important to acknowledge that domestic constraints are not the only impediment to a US-North Korean grand bargain.

Libya and Ukraine to know that formal security guarantees, whether bilateral or multi-lateral, are no substitute for an independent capacity to ensure national security. One way around the issue might be to conclude a denuclearisation agreement that permitted North Korea enough flexibility to restart the production of nuclear weapons (a 'breakout clause') should security conditions worsen. Such a concession from the US would be an enormous boost to the credibility of any agreement on denuclearisation, giving Pyongyang the greatest possible confidence that the US and its allies would have self-interested reasons to avoid abrogating a peace deal.

However, there is a vanishingly small chance that actors inside the US (or South Korea) would accept a deal with North Korea that permitted the regime a short breakout time. When President Obama agreed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and other world powers, hawks in the US wasted little time criticising the deal as inimical to US national security interests. That deal had left Tehran with a breakout time of around 12 months – an unacceptable level of threat from the perspective of the US' Iran hawks (Peterson 2015). Republican legislators led by Tom Cotton, Senator for Arkansas, wrote a letter to the leaders of Iran, in which they pledged to undo the diplomatic accord between Washington and Tehran (Graham 2015). This threat was later carried out by President Trump (Landler 2018). The fate of the Iran nuclear deal suggests that at least some domestic actors would be similarly opposed to entering a nuclear deal with North Korea resembling the JCPOA. Moreover, any agreement that entitled North Korea to a short breakout time would be acutely vulnerable to a change in administration and, as such, would lack credibility from the outset.

Our conclusion, then, is that the US political system is unlikely to support the provision of meaningful security guarantees to North Korea. A nominal peace agreement might be possible, but the US political class will not countenance the concrete concessions that would be necessary to reassure Pyongyang that nuclear disarmament is a safe choice. There is no evidence that the US Congress or the wider political system would accept the withdrawal of troops from South Korea, Japan and other regional bases. Nor will a preponderance of domestic actors agree to North Korea retaining a short breakout time to rebuild its nuclear arsenal. Yet, in the absence of such commitment devices, it will be challenging for US leaders to convince their North Korean counterparts that denuclearisation can be pursued without opening themselves up to intolerable risks. This will leave Pyongyang to continue viewing nuclear weapons as the best available guarantee of national and regime security.

Keeping Kim: the challenge of providing regime security

Even if the US could guarantee North Korea's external security, its leaders would still need to convince the Pyongyang regime that North Korea's internal system of government could survive nuclear disarmament. Many analysts have noted that North Korea's demand for a strong military – including nuclear weapons – is not only because of the historical and contemporary threat posed by South Korea and the US but also because the regime's domestic grip on power is intimately bound up with its military policies (for example, Roehrig 2013; Panda 2020).

Might the North Korean regime be persuaded to give up extreme militarism (including its nuclear weapons programme) in exchange for a way to base its rule on domestic

success? Analysts who have explored this idea have concluded that it might be possible over the long term, but that it would require the US to make the first move (see, for example, Kong 2014). That is, normalised relations with the US would open the door to economic reforms and modest growth inside North Korea, but Pyongyang will be inhibited from pursuing any such reforms so long as it suffers from economic and diplomatic isolation (Lee 2019). For its part, North Korea has expressed an interest in receiving economic assistance from the US – and it has shown at least some willingness to make concessions in order to secure such aid (Shin and Moon 2019, 42-3; but cf. Kim 2018). In China, the Communist regime has managed to retain political control despite economic liberalisation. The same is true in Vietnam, Laos and Cuba – albeit to varying degrees. The Kim regime might be able to expect the same outcome – but only with the tacit support of the US.

In the past, the US enjoyed some moderate success by pursuing this tack. In 1993, for example, the Clinton Administration was able to persuade North Korea to refrain from withdrawing from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) by granting assurances against the use of force and promising not to interfere with North Korea's internal affairs. In June 1994, North Korea announced plans to withdraw from the International Atomic Energy Agency. However, the US was again able to persuade Pyongyang to exercise restraint. In August 1994, the two sides agreed upon a three-stage plan for eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons. The subsequent Agreed Framework (adopted in October 1994) stated that the US would work towards normalising economic and diplomatic relations with North Korea while also assisting with the construction of 'proliferation-resistant' light-water reactors.⁵

The Agreed Framework ultimately broke down. Between 1995 and 1998, economic sanctions were imposed on North Korea, most notably for the test firing of North Korea's Taepodong-1 missile in 1998 (Arms Control Association 2020). Even so, several analysts have since argued that the Agreed Framework had been a partial success and ought to be revived. In his review of US policy toward North Korea, William Perry (Secretary of Defense, 1994-1997) outlined three considerations for forming policy regarding North Korea. First, the US must deal with North Korea on the assumption that its form of government is unlikely to change. Second, the US should be wary of provoking a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. And third, it should be acknowledged that the Agreed Framework had successfully frozen the production of plutonium in North Korea for at least a short period of time, suggesting that an approach along the lines of the Agreed Framework might work again in the future (Perry 1999).

The US has yet to return to a strategy of offering meaningful concessions and inducements to North Korea.⁶ Instead of returning to the Agreed Framework, President Bush placed North Korea on the 'axis of evil' alongside Iraq and Iran (a move, it should be noted, that preceded North Korea's provocative withdrawal from the NPT in 2003). Bush subsequently revived negotiations with North Korea in the

⁵For a detailed overview of the 1993-1994 crisis, see Wit *et al.* (2004).

⁶In fact, US leaders were never enthusiastic about implementing the terms of the Agreed Framework in the first place (Smith 2019; Kang 2003, 321).

form of the Six-party Talks, but ultimately failed to make any progress on denuclearisation – in part because of a failure to follow through on meaningful diplomatic concessions promised to Pyongyang (Smith 2019). Certainly, the Bush Administration did not attempt to purchase North Korea's cooperation through inducements of the sort offered by Clinton in 1994. On the contrary, US demands of North Korea *increased* during this time. Namely, US policy came to be that North Korea must demonstrate progress toward denuclearisation *before* any concessions would be forthcoming from the US, which was in contrast to the Agreed Framework formula of allowing some concessions *in exchange for* progress toward denuclearisation. This was despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that North Korea was making demonstrable advances in terms of nuclear weapons technology.

Even President Obama, who had offered to meet Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, "without precondition" while campaigning for the presidency (CNN 2007), quickly walked back the idea once in office. Under Obama, US policy essentially remained one of demanding that North Korea must move toward denuclearisation before it could expect to receive concessions from the US (Kim 2010; Jackson 2019). All the while, North Korea's nuclear arsenal continued to grow. By the time of Trump's outreach to North Korea, Pyongyang had produced at least 30 nuclear warheads, along with missiles capable of reaching the continental US.

North Korea's nuclear arsenal is now so large that encouraging the regime to swap it for economic relief would be enormously costly. Help constructing light-water reactors would no longer be enough. Nor would a formal peace agreement, diplomatic normalisation or gradual sanctions relief. Despite the grimness of their domestic economy, North Korean leaders seem to believe that they occupy a stronger bargaining position than ever before – and not without reason. Yet important actors in the US are simply unwilling to agree to the sort of concessions that North Korea might now require to accept denuclearisation.

Trump encountered this problem during his two high-profile summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un – the first in Singapore in 2018, the second in Hanoi in 2019 – at which the issue of denuclearisation took centre stage. Despite wanting an agreement with Kim Jong-un badly, Trump could not bring his Administration to offer Pyongyang the size of economic aid (sanctions relief) that North Korea would have needed to begin a process of denuclearisation. In a press statement released by the North Korean Foreign Minister, the regime reported that the Pyongyang delegation had "offered the permanent dismantlement of a portion of nuclear material production facilities at Yongbyon Nuclear Research facility in exchange for a 'partial lifting' of [the] sanctions" that were hurting North Korea's export industries and limiting their fuel imports (Pak 2019). Trump's advisers were reluctant to support lifting these sanctions, however, without first seeing verifiable progress toward denuclearisation. To be sure, Trump tried to sweeten the pot for Kim by proposing a peace declaration that would have provided liaison offices in each other's capitals and dangling the possibility of an "end-of-war declaration" (Ibid.). That Kim chose to walk away from these enticements suggests that he cared more about the removal of economic sanctions – something that would have bolstered his ability to provide goods and services to North Korean people – than mere diplomatic normalisation.

Why did Trump not offer Pyongyang larger economic concessions in exchange for making progress on denuclearisation? One reason, perhaps, is that Trump's team suspected (with good reason) that North Korea would renege on its commitments, which meant that any economic relief must be offered in stages. But another part of the explanation is surely that the Administration anticipated being punished in domestic politics for anything that resembled appeasement.⁷ Indeed, Trump's political rivals criticised him just for meeting with Kim. In the words of Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren, "Our President shouldn't be squandering American influence on photo ops and exchanging love letters with a ruthless dictator" (cit. in Chiacu 2019). They would surely have intensified their attacks had Trump agreed to provide concessions to Pyongyang. In this context, it is possible to imagine Trump's political advisers advising against accepting a deal 'at any cost'; running for re-election in November 2020 on the basis of having 'appeased' North Korea might not have been a winning strategy.

It is easy to understand why aid or relief to North Korea is hard for domestic actors inside the US to swallow. Pyongyang is an abjectly inhumane regime. It has grossly misruled its people and visited severe hardships upon them. Ideally, there would be an alternative government-in-waiting to replace the current regime; a set of actors or institutions that could be empowered at the expense of the Kim dynasty. And the possibility should not be overlooked that Pyongyang is riven by its own domestic political divisions; that there might be factions within the ruling regime who disagree on questions of foreign policy. But according to the best available analysis, it is a devastating political fact that the US' only alternative to working with the existing regime is to do nothing constructive to edge that same regime towards reform (Chubb and Yeo 2019). Regime change is not an option, and spontaneous reforms do not seem to be on the horizon. As Perry argued in the late 1990s, the US must base its North Korea policy on the assumption that the current regime will remain in place. This means engagement, if only the US political system would support such policies.

Our argument turns on its head the common criticism that negotiating with hostile powers is the preserve of misguided idealists. Properly understood, a diplomatic approach to the North Korean nuclear issue is a hard-headed strategy that should appeal to those who urge a narrow focus on the national interest and to de-emphasise values such as human rights when crafting foreign policy. Rightly or wrongly, however, the costs of tolerating and even propping up one of the most terrible regimes in world history are almost certainly to be too much for actors inside the US to accept. This means that the US government will remain constrained in terms of how much it can offer Pyongyang in exchange for denuclearisation. More likely than not, the political climate inside the US – political polarisation, the justified expectation of harsh criticism from the opposing party and a commentariat that is largely distrustful of major concessions being made to foreign adversaries – is already such that the sitting administration is constrained from even considering a plan to offer North Korea sufficient inducements to support denuclearisation. This is not the only reason that

⁷One of Trump's most popular lines of attack against his predecessor, President Obama, related to Obama's decision to ease sanctions against Iran in 2015 as part of the deal struck with Tehran. Trump accused Obama of sending "pallets" or "barrels" of cash to Iran (Voorhees 2016). It stands to reason that Trump would wish to avoid similar charges being made against his Administration for any economic relief offered to Pyongyang.

US-North Korean negotiations have broken down in recent years, but it should be considered a major contributing factor.

The rising price of peace

To begin concluding, it is worth reflecting on the rising price of peace with North Korea. For while the goal of denuclearisation has been a constant in recent decades,⁸ the context of US-North Korean bilateral relations has been anything but static. Most importantly, the costs and benefits of denuclearisation have varied from North Korea's perspective. When Pyongyang's nuclear programme was in its infancy, giving it up would have cost little because it was not an operational source of security in its own right. Now that it has produced some tangible assets, it would be much costlier for North Korean leaders to give up their hard-won gains. At great cost, North Korea has purchased for itself the ultimate guarantee of national (and regime) security, not to mention an abundance of prestige (Panda 2020). Denuclearisation is therefore not something that North Korea will undertake lightly, especially considering the fate of other ('rogue') regimes that did agree to Western demands regarding disarmament and weapons inspections. Of course, it is possible to imagine that North Korea's leaders could still be induced to accept the international community's demands for denuclearisation – but the point is that the price of achieving denuclearisation has likely escalated in line with Pyongyang's progress toward an independent nuclear deterrent.

At the same time, there has been a tightening of constraints imposed by US domestic politics. Some actors inside the US have always tended to oppose policies of conciliation toward North Korea for the simple reason that it is unpalatable and unpopular to make meaningful concessions to a regime that treats its own people so heinously, and which shows so few signs of domestic reform. However, these domestic constraints have become more severe as Pyongyang's nuclear programme has progressed. The logic is simple: if US leaders were to acknowledge that North Korea must be offered more in exchange for denuclearisation than it was offered in the past, then this would be tantamount to an admission that North Korea had succeeded in its efforts to gain bargaining leverage over the US. No US leader wants to reward Pyongyang for having defied the United States by pursuing an illegal nuclear weapons programme. On the contrary, the dominant narrative in the US media is one of "black-and-white, good-versus-evil" (Curran and Gibson 2020, 366). As a result, the dynamic in US politics has been for politicians (legislators, contenders for the presidency and those angling for jobs in the federal government) to outbid one another in terms of hawkishness toward Pyongyang; leaders are rewarded (or at least not punished) for being 'tough' on North Korea, with advocates of anything even barely resembling appeasement risking criticisms of weakness, naivety, fecklessness or recklessness (Chiacu 2019).

To sum up, North Korea's expected payoff from denuclearisation has risen while US willingness to agree to a negotiated settlement has diminished. This is a recipe for failed diplomacy. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that President Trump's overtures toward

⁸For the purposes of this article, we assume that denuclearisation will remain the goal of the US. However, we note that there are strong arguments in favour of accepting North Korea's status as a nuclear-armed state. See, for example, Brewer and Terry (2021).

North Korea between 2018 and 2020 met with unsuccess, despite the President's visible eagerness to secure a deal. By the time Trump took office, North Korea had an operational nuclear deterrent and a sizable stockpile of warheads. As a nuclear weapons-armed state, North Korea boasted prestige, status, a clear guarantee against armed attack and a non-trivial amount of bargaining power. Ironically, even the summits with President Trump – ostensibly for the purpose of discussing the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula – would not have happened unless North Korea was in possession of a nuclear arsenal in the first place. The challenge for Trump was to convince Pyongyang that giving up its nuclear weapons capability would inoculate the Kim family against invasion and regime change while allowing the regime to keep the gains associated with nuclearisation. As it turned out, this was an insurmountable task – in part, we suspect, because actors inside the US would have balked at the full price of peace had Trump offered Pyongyang anything close to what it would have taken to secure denuclearisation.

According to media reports, the second (Hanoi) summit between Trump and Kim fell apart after President Trump issued a blunt proposal that North Korea transfer all its nuclear weapons material to the US. This gambit forced the two sides to grapple with the ultimate question of whether North Korea's leader was, in fact, willing to accept US demands (Wroughton and Brunnstrom 2019). As it turned out, Kim was not prepared to make the proposed exchange. Although Trump and Kim would meet one more time at Panmunjom (in the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea), there would be no more meaningful progress toward a diplomatic agreement during Trump's time in office. Did the Hanoi summit collapse because Trump asked for too much or because he offered too little? There is at least some evidence to suggest the latter. The official position of the US is that talks broke down because Kim had demanded sanctions relief beyond what Washington was willing to accept. North Korea disputes this version of events, claiming that Kim only requested partial sanctions relief (Davenport 2019). Either way, it is worth considering whether US leaders have failed to catch up with the rising expectations of the North Korean government. Is there a gap between what North Korea now requires to accept denuclearisation and what the US government is willing to offer? In this provocation, we have suggested that indeed there is – and that this might be playing a role in inhibiting the realisation of a diplomatic agreement.

Conclusion

President Trump explored ways to turn North Korea into a satisfied yet denuclearised power between 2018 and 2020. Across two summits, President Trump offered North Korea some significant concessions in hopes of convincing Kim Jong-un to accede to denuclearisation. The first concession, at least in the eyes of US policy-makers and domestic audiences, was the bare agreement to meet face-to-face with Kim.⁹ During the summits themselves, the US offered sanctions relief and a formal peace treaty in exchange for complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear

⁹In the past, US leaders had always used the prospect of a formal summit as a carrot to entice North Korea to make some concessions of its own (Ryan 2018). By contrast, Trump agreed to meet with Kim without asking for anything in return.

weapons programme. Outside of the summit framework, Trump occasionally suggested a drawdown of US forces in East Asia, including South Korea, and massive economic investment that would turn North Korea into a much wealthier society. In 2018 and 2019, Trump even cancelled or postponed several planned drills involving the US and South Korean militaries in hopes of reducing tensions with the North (Samuels 2019). This suggests that Trump was willing to go to great lengths to nudge North Korea in the direction of nuclear disarmament.

Yet try as he might, Trump could not convince North Korea's leaders that they could be safe, secure and satisfied even without a nuclear weapons capability. Why? One answer might be that North Korea is a poor negotiator, having now failed to convert bargaining power into meaningful concessions from the US (Pacheco Pardo 2021).¹⁰ Alternatively, it might be US leaders who have made diplomatic blunders during 2018-2020 (and the prior three decades) by misjudging what it might take to secure the permanent denuclearisation of North Korea. Another explanation might be that trust between the US and North Korea has eroded to the point where leaders in Pyongyang no longer regard US overtures as credible,¹¹ and so are forced to retain their nuclear arsenal because there is no practicable option to trade it away. It is also possible that the North Korean regime simply does not want to give up its nuclear weapons and never will, because the benefits of possessing an operational arsenal far outweigh anything that could possibly be offered in return (Terry 2021). We do not dismiss any of these arguments, and we did not probe their explanatory power in this article. In fact, we maintain that multiple factors are likely operating simultaneously to prevent the realisation of a US-North Korean agreement on denuclearisation.

What we do argue is that US domestic politics ought to be considered one set of factors that inhibit the realisation of peace and denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula. Simply put, the true price of denuclearising North Korea (which, we expect, likely exceeds even what Trump was willing to offer in Singapore and Hanoi) is too high for the US political system to bear. For this reason, if a grand bargain is attempted again, then it will fail – if not because North Korea is insatiable (which is possible) then because the costs of a lasting bargain will be too high for the US to accept. If we are right that critical stumbling blocks to denuclearisation can be found on the US side of the relationship as well as the North Korean side, then there are important implications for the future of diplomacy. Namely, peace on the Korean Peninsula might still be possible – but any package of concessions capable of altering North Korea's trajectory will have to be initiated and proposed by actors other than the US, such as South Korea,¹² Japan and China.

In the final analysis, this is perhaps the most likely pathway to a diplomatic solution to North Korea's nuclear weapons programme: multilateral efforts led by regional powers, with the US playing a supporting and enabling role. This is not to downplay the huge and indispensable role that exists for the US to fashion the external and internal conditions necessary for North Korea to accede to changes in its behaviour. Indeed, it is impossible

¹⁰North Korea may also simply be prone to making mistakes, like all regimes (Abrahamian 2019).

¹¹On the difficulty that individual leaders face when it comes to establishing credibility, see the literature discussed in Lupton *et al.* (2017).

¹²Some scholars disagree, arguing that a middle power like South Korea is unlikely to have much success engaging North Korea. See, for example, Kim (2018).

to envision the pacification of the Kim regime without massive concessions on the part of Washington. But it is to suggest that US involvement in such a resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue must be re-envisioned as a supporting role, not a leadership one. This means that the US must stand ready to make consequential changes, but only at the behest of its allies and regional partners – requests that might provide a sitting administration with political cover to do the otherwise unthinkable. America’s own leaders, we suspect, will never be able to take the initiative.

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