

Unconventional Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula: Implications for Seoul, Pyongyang and Washington

by Lorenzo Mariani and Fabio Angiolillo

Following the third inter-Korean meeting between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un in late April, on 12 June, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un will gather in Singapore for yet another historic summit, the first meeting between a sitting US President and a member of the Kim family.

Many have welcomed such conciliatory signals. Yet, the abrupt shift from war drums to high-level summits has left little time for a strategic assessment of the issues at stake.

Seoul, Pyongyang and Washington are now involved in what may be termed “backward diplomacy”, a reversed diplomatic process in which high-level summits represent the beginnings of a negotiation rather than its concluding stage. Beijing is undoubtedly involved in these processes. China’s longstanding alliance with North Korea has thus far allowed Xi Jinping to act in the shadows, limiting his exposure to this unconventional diplomacy.

Given the lack of fixed assurances, each actor is approaching the summit and the wider diplomatic process on the Korean Peninsula with different expectations. This increases the risk of misunderstandings, making it hard to predict an outcome. Billed as the “deal of the century”,¹ what opportunities and challenges can be expected from the Singapore summit? What are the pros and cons of backward diplomacy and who stands to gain the most from this unconventional approach to negotiations?

As in all previous rounds of talks, North Korea holds the keys for a breakthrough as its active participation and buy-in is essential for any progress. Relying on this advantage, Kim has set the stage for an asymmetric diplomatic showdown, banking on the legitimization granted by a high-level summit with Donald

¹ Simon Tisdall, “Trump believes the North Korea summit is all about him. But Kim has a plan, too”, in *The Guardian*, 10 June 2018, <https://gu.com/p/8nxvx>.

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ISSN 2532-6570

IAI COMMENTARIES 18 | 31 - JUNE 2018

Trump while postponing concrete concessions to a later date. Meanwhile, China is carefully weighing its involvement, supporting the process from the outside and signalling it's opt-in or opt-out according to each new development.

Backward diplomacy thus represents the perfect arena for North Korea, a means to gain a highly symbolic reward while conceding very little in return. Kim is offering many symbolic concessions in an effort to tempt his counterparts to agree to a meeting. By opening up to reconciliation, Kim is presenting himself as a mature statesman who accomplished the nation's long-standing goal of becoming a nuclear power, while now engaging in diplomatic brinkmanship at the international and regional levels, not least in an effort to consolidate his legitimacy.

Despite this fragile and perilous framework, the current reduction of tensions does represent a favourable environment to re-launch talks. It moreover provides short-term domestic political benefits for the parties involved, as each stands to gain in this domain.

Entangled in a seemingly never ending web of scandals and controversy, Donald Trump sees a possible resolution to the Korean standoff as an opportunity for an immediate victory that could be exploited in the run-up to the US midterm elections in November.

The potential for reconciliation is also politically important for South Korea's leader, albeit some in Seoul still hold

doubts over the process.² Aside from its historic significance, the promise of peace and reconciliation on the peninsula would allow Moon Jae-in to implement his ambitious domestic agenda through mounting public support.

Ultimately it will be up to each leader to balance personal legacy with national interests and determine whether the potential benefits outweigh the risks. However, while South Korea and the US are likely to secure some results in the mid-term, Kim Jong-un is already benefitting from recent developments.

During the presidential campaign in 2017, South Korea's Moon Jae-in expressed his willingness to meet with the North Korean leader, purposely working to create a favourable environment for Kim to make the first move.³ After testing Moon's commitment through a series of calculated provocations, Kim Jong-un unexpectedly opened the door to formal talks with the South in his New Year speech in January 2018.⁴

This proactive posture, backed by advancements in the North's nuclear and missile programmes, allowed Kim Jong-un to surprise his counterparts, catching them off guard with a sudden gesture that has largely determined the pace of the diplomatic convergence with Seoul ever since.

² Author's interviews, Seoul, 28 May–6 June 2018.

³ Choe Sang-hun, "South Korea Elects Moon Jae-in, Who Backs Talks with North, as President", in *The New York Times*, 9 May 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2pruNXk>.

⁴ Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Address, 1 January 2018, <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>.

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The effectiveness of Kim Jong-un's diplomatic manoeuvring also needs to be contextualized within the current enigma of US foreign policy. Trump has long cultivated an image as the "ultimate dealmaker", yet his repeated personnel changes and flouting of expert advice have only added to the confusion.⁵

Trump's tendency to upend traditional diplomatic praxes, his narcissism and entrepreneurial or transactional approach to foreign policy, has helped North Korea's strategy. Kim's proposal for a bilateral meeting was made knowing that such an invite would entice the American president, inflating his ego while playing on his personality traits.

Strategically speaking, backward diplomacy is therefore benefitting Kim Jong-un. In fact, having scheduled a deadline for the summits with both South Korea and the US, the lack of preparatory arrangements means there is not enough time to clarify the details of an agreement that satisfies the strategic interests of both the Blue House and the White House.

In this respect, backward diplomacy could actually be counterproductive. Using summits as a starting point for negotiating is likely to tempt the parties to find an agreement that would guarantee quick returns in terms of international and domestic capital but may not lay a sufficiently strong groundwork for a long-term

⁵ Aaron L. Connelly, "Autopilot: East Asia Policy under Trump", in *Lowy Institute Analyses*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/node/341811>.

breakthrough.

Any agreement would therefore likely be fragile and lack depth or consistency, focussing on general principles rather than tackling specific issues and providing concrete and agreed solutions. Lacking binding commitments, the outcome of the Singapore summit is therefore unlikely to diminish long-term uncertainty over the Korean Peninsula. The potential for misunderstandings is real, not least given Trump's unpredictable mood swings and the traditional tendency by North Korea to invoke legal loopholes to defect on its commitments.

Without an incontrovertible document that highlights a step-by-step approach addressing the two main issues at stake – i.e. security assurances for the North Korean regime and the complete denuclearization of the country – conditions for major disagreements may quickly re-emerge, as happened with the Leap Day Agreement in 2012.⁶

To avoid this or at least contain and minimise the effect of the aforementioned variables, South Korea's role as a mediator is crucial. Here, the relationship with the Trump administration stands out as a potential irritant given its general unpredictability, which in turn could be exploited by the North to renege on agreements.

⁶ Mark Fitzpatrick, "Leap Day in North Korea", in *Foreign Policy*, 29 February 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/29/leap-day-in-north-korea>; Ankit Panda, "A Great Leap to Nowhere: Remembering the US-North Korea 'Leap Day' Deal", in *The Diplomat*, 29 February 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/?p=78482>.

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Moon Jae-in needs to patiently bring the US and North Korea along, converging towards his mid-term strategy of securing a significant breakthrough on the Peninsula while working to ensure strategic dividends for all actors throughout the process.

Ultimately, South Korea needs to redefine the security paradigm on the Korean Peninsula as an exclusive bilateral matter between Seoul and Pyongyang. This will likely be Moon's greatest test, and much of the diplomatic process hinges on his success.

Such an effort entails challenges for both North and South Korea, as each of their respective allies and security providers, the People's Republic of China and the United States, need to willingly suspend their involvement on security matters on the Peninsula. Both are permanent members at the United Nation Security Council and this fragile shift will be possible only if Xi Jinping and Donald Trump will allow Moon Jae-in to harness the North into deeper forms of engagement encompassing social and cultural exchanges as well as economic cooperation, military and political dialogue.

In so doing, Moon will need to convince both Trump and Kim Jong-un to prioritize mid and long term strategy over short-term domestic and political returns. The effort will not be easy, not least in light of the personality traits of Moon's respective partners in Washington and Pyongyang.

11 June 2018

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