

The New York Times

Amid Talks With U.S., Glimpses of New Futures for North Korea

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July 2, 2019

When President Richard M. Nixon met in Beijing almost 50 years ago with Mao Zedong, China's totalitarian strongman and a nuclear-armed adversary, the two leaders knew they were setting their countries on a new path.

But they had little idea where that path led. They could hardly have foreseen the changes within China or today's tangled relationship of economic interdependence and intense, if peaceful, rivalry — much less whatever will come after another half century.

Now, it's President Trump and Kim Jong-un's turn.

Whether or not they reach agreement on North Korea's nuclear weapons, the two men appear on their way to the forging the relationship both have said they want. They have portrayed their three meetings — most recently at the Demilitarized Zone dividing the Koreas — as consequential in their own right, loaded with the symbolism of mutual acceptance and respect.

But like Nixon and Mao, the American and North Korean leaders cannot know where their experiment will lead.

While few see North Korea as likely to surrender its weapons, the country's economy and diplomatic posture are already changing. North Korea experts, former United States intelligence analysts and scholars of international relations say that while firm predictions are impossible, those changes are already beginning to open a set of once-closed possibilities.

A Virtuous Cycle, but Breakable

"In the classes I teach, we're always looking for what's new, what's different," said John Delury, a historian at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.

For most of Mr. Kim's rule, change has been scarce. His country grew its weapons programs, provoked regular international crises and remained isolated as much by choice as by crippling, American-led sanctions.

Then, during preparations for summit meetings with his American and South Korean counterparts that were expected to do little more than confer legitimacy on Mr. Kim, he made an announcement: North Korea would drop the militarized half of its longtime strategy of dual military and economic development. Trade and prosperity would come.

“That’s new,” Mr. Delury said. “For Kim Jong-un to say domestically the strategy is changed, it’s all about the economy, that’s not something that his father did or his grandfather did.”

The world does not need to like Mr. Kim, Mr. Delury said, to see hints of a virtuous cycle of diplomacy and economic relief. As tensions ease, the theory goes, peace brings the promise of sanctions relief or even trade, inducing Mr. Kim to soften further. Threats or isolation, which would risk those gains, become less attractive.

Emma Ashford, a scholar of foreign policy at the Washington-based Cato Institute, said the world did not have to take Mr. Kim on his word alone.

“There is a fair amount of evidence that Kim Jong-un has accepted that the North Korean economy is, if not liberalizing, then there is a bottom-up marketization occurring and he has to accept that in order to survive,” Ms. Ashford said.

She cited reports of growing and widely tolerated black market activity. “That’s something you see a lot of dictators do,” she said.

And many of the world’s fiercest autocrats have found they can most safely remain in power, Ms. Ashford said, by shifting their promise to citizens from “I will keep you safe” to “I will make you prosperous.”

Both China and Vietnam, once isolated and totalitarian, took this path, and as they have grown economically interdependent with the outside world, threats of war have cooled. While both remain severely authoritarian, a degree of controlled openness has significantly improved the lives of everyday citizens.

But that virtuous cycle can be fragile, especially in its early stages when gains are uncertain and leaders wary of taking blame.

And domestic politics can shift quickly, even in a hereditary dictatorship. Establishments in any country tend to favor the status quo. Mr. Kim is still a 35-year-old surrounded by older officials and generals.

“It’s a year now since he told his public: ‘We’re doing it. We’re 100 percent on the economy,’” Mr. Delury said. “He needs to deliver.”

Mr. Kim may be coming under pressure at home, according to Robert Carlin, a longtime C.I.A. and State Department analyst who now studies North Korean domestic politics at the Stimson Center. While open dissent is forbidden, the country’s power brokers are thought to use state media to signal to Mr. Kim and one another.

Propaganda outlets, Mr. Carlin found, contain subtle but unusual hints of dissatisfaction with Mr. Kim’s emphasis on diplomacy, and particularly his appeals to economic openness.

The United States has itself proven fickle, withdrawing from the nuclear agreement with Iran despite its own intelligence agencies concluding that Iran was complying. Fifteen years earlier, President George W. Bush withdrew American compliance from a nuclear agreement with North Korea.

Pacified? Or Emboldened?

As North Korea's place in the world changes, Mr. Kim is testing his new status.

North Korea experts are divided over whether international acceptance will embolden Mr. Kim to indulge his worst behaviors or, by reducing the risk of conflict, lead him in the other direction.

The disagreement comes down, Ms. Ashford argued, to this question: "What is North Korea going to do with its nukes?"

If Mr. Kim sees the weapons as cudgels with which to blackmail other countries, then the cycle of threats and crises is likely to continue. While research finds that nuclear blackmail rarely works, Mr. Kim could still be tempted.

But if he sees the weapons as a deterrent for staving off foreign invasion, then he could read Mr. Trump's shows of acceptance as proof that his nuclear strategy succeeded, winning him space for diplomacy and trade.

Even if North Korea finds that joining the community of nations serves it better than nuclear provocations, there is one threat it may never be able to overcome: South Korea's relative wealth and freedom. They undermine North Korea's legitimacy as a separate state.

"As long as South Korea exists, they will always be a threat to North Korea," said Sue Mi Terry, a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and former American intelligence analyst. "Strategically, you still have to worry about German-style unification by absorption."

The more that North Korea integrates into the world or opens its economy, the more that disparity with the South will become apparent to its citizens — and the harder it may be for Mr. Kim to persuade his citizens that they are better off under his rule.

That threat, which has long driven much of North Korea's belligerence and self-imposed isolation, will remain no matter what deal Mr. Kim strikes with Mr. Trump, said Robert Kelly, a political scientist at Pusan National University in South Korea.

The country has built its legitimacy on its totalitarian cult of personality, its controlled economy and its militarization for too long to give those up, Mr. Kelly said. That, he said, puts "an ideological limitation" on Mr. Kim's ambitions.

"North Korea needs to keep Kimism," he said. "It ideologically explains the separation from South Korea and the clashes along the border explain it militarily."

A More Permanent Division

If Mr. Kim's ambition is to stave off a Korean reunification like Germany's, cementing North Korea as an accepted and separate state, that might allow peace with the United States, but it might not with South Korea.

Politics in South Korea is sharply divided between liberals who prefer outreach to the North and conservatives who see it as a mortal threat.

Ms. Terry, the former intelligence analyst, warned that any conservative South Korean government would feel compelled to confront the North, particularly if it no longer felt it had the full backing of the United States.

“We forget that now,” she said, because South Korea’s current leader is unusually dovish, but “there has always been that risk.”

Even in the most optimistic assessments, change for North Korea’s citizens, who are among the poorest and least free in the world, is expected to be one of degrees.

“If sanctions start to lift and you start to see serious G.D.P. growth, you’re going to see a lot fewer people living at subsistence level,” Mr. Delury said. The best-case scenario, he said, would be a shift from “a semi-totalitarian system” to “something along the lines of Vietnam.”

Such an outcome may not be easy for the world to accept — particularly if the first hints of openness bring more glimpses of life in North Korea.

“It means propping up the world’s worst human rights abuser,” Mr. Kelly said. “I’ve been to North Korea. It’s a failed state outside of Pyongyang and outside of the military. It is barely a state, barely hanging on by its fingernails.”