



South Korea suffers as Washington dithers

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SEOUL — Visit Seoul, South Korea's vibrant capital, and you immediately recognise the greatest existential threat to North Korea. The latter's citizens comparing their nation to the Republic of Korea (ROK). After a difficult birth, the ROK has spawned a successful democratic polity and prosperous capitalist economy. In comparison, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, is a wreck.

This problem is not new. The South took off economically in the 1960s and held its first truly free presidential election 32 years ago. However, the North Korean authorities were able to largely seal off their nation from others. Access to the rest of the world was highly restricted.

Technology and defections have since undermined the regime's control. Indeed, most North Koreans have seen at least a few South Korean TV shows, which highlight the vast gulf between the two societies. When I visited the North in 1992, the border guards were most concerned about the books I brought with me. On my 2017 trip they focused on the flash drives that I carried.

How Pyongyang responds to this challenge matters hugely for the future of both Koreas. For years North Korea was viewed as little other than a military threat to its southern neighbour. However, majority opinion among analysts and officials with whom I talked on my recent trip to the South is that Kim Jong-un represents a leadership different in kind, not just degree. That view is not unanimous. Past North Korean behaviour has given numerous reasons to be skeptical of any pacific claims by any member of the Kim dynasty.

However, most of my interlocutors believed that the North's Supreme Leader was more supportive of economic reform and interested in diplomatic engagement. Some pointed to his youthful educational sojourn in Switzerland. A mix of policies, statements, and activities offer supportive evidence.

At the same time, virtually no one believed that Kim was prepared to abandon his nuclear arsenal. When one scholar told me he thought there was a small chance, a colleague snorted

“Really!?” At the hawkish end of the spectrum was the view that Kim still hoped to conquer the South. More common was the conclusion that nukes were too useful as a defence against regime change and reward for the military’s support. Even those in his administration appeared to have restrained expectations. Kim might hope to transform his nation into a responsible member of the international community, but it was likely to be one with nuclear weapons.

Still, most of the people I spoke with believed that inter-Korean engagement was worth pursuing. So does the public, though the political opposition has been critical of President Moon Jae-in’s emphasis on inter-Korean cooperation. Rather like the Republican Party and Russia, the South Korean right, which was routed when President Park Geun-hye’s government ingloriously collapsed in a corruption scandal in 2017, cannot easily imagine a world in which North Korea is not an overwhelming threat.

Although Moon’s approval ratings have been trending down, mostly as a result of the ROK’s economic troubles, his opponents so far have been unable to take full advantage of his difficulties. Discredited by Park’s removal from office and subsequent imprisonment, they are divided and disorganised. Much depends on the outcome of next year’s National Assembly elections, which will determine whether he becomes a lame duck. Still, Moon has much at stake in the ongoing negotiations with Kim since seemingly settling the Korean cold war is his greatest achievement after two years in office.

Almost everyone I talked with hoped for détente with Pyongyang. Even those who viewed denuclearisation as unlikely believed engagement was desirable—other than a few holdouts who expected any gains to be transitory, as Kim merely replayed the game of his father and grandfather. While there was no consensus as to the endpoint, most analysts believed that negotiations could reduce tensions and threats.

This belief in turn generated significant animus toward the Trump administration. The collapse of the Hanoi summit shocked most of South Korean officialdom. Expected was a modest agreement including liaison offices, a peace declaration, and some trade of denuclearisation for sanctions relief. The latter, officials and analysts hoped, would remove some barriers to South-North cooperation. For many South Koreans, failure had simply become unthinkable. The shock has only slowly abated.

In private, government officials were no less critical than outside analysts. Many see a potentially evanescent opportunity which, if missed, could result in a return the more confrontational relations of the past. Almost uniformly, other than those who view the North’s outreach as more bane than boon, South Koreans see Washington as the problem.

President Donald Trump receives little respect, but his willingness to negotiate is appreciated. After all, that is the only reason there is an opening. But even those on the right offer few words of praise for his diplomatic abilities. His seeming insistence on a speedy big deal is viewed as a dead end, which risks pushing Kim back toward his regime’s traditional uncooperative path.

The president’s critics mostly blame his aides, especially National Security Adviser John Bolton, who they see as antagonistic to a negotiated settlement. Some suspect active sabotage, support

for a policy which Bolton knows is unacceptable to Kim. And leading South Koreans are quite aware of the bizarrely dangerous views of Americans such as Senator Lindsey Graham, who dismissed the prospect of war on the Korean peninsula as being “over there”, and thus of little concern. His indifference to the possibility of hundreds of thousands or even millions of casualties was not reassuring.

The pending presidential campaign presents another source of concern. Many of those I met were worried. Will the desire to demonstrate a victory lead the president to make concessions? Will frustration with the ongoing stalemate cause North Korea to increase provocations, triggering administration retaliation? Will Democrats turn the DPRK into a target, making negotiation difficult if they win? Many South Koreans foresaw danger for Seoul in the coming months.

As always, the future of the US-South Korea alliance was of interest. Unsurprisingly, most of Seoul officialdom places a high value on Washington’s commitment to defend the South. Gaining a superpower’s protection simultaneously increases deterrence while reducing the need for military expenditures. No wonder that is widely seen as a good deal from the South Korea’s perspective.

Still, there were a few incipient dissident voices. For some the potential collapse of negotiations with the North illustrated the price paid for dependence on America. Washington always would act in America’s, not South Korea’s, interest. Others saw the possibility of a peaceful peninsula eliminating the need for a foreign garrison. Which suggested at least a chance that South Koreans might in the future seek a different, more limited relationship with America.

Until then, however, South Korean residents are likely to obsess over whether Washington might walk away. Trump is the great uncertainty. They wonder if he will decide that the alliance is no longer necessary, especially if he strikes a deal with North Korea. They also fear that he might make impossible demands, for instance, a substantial increase in host nation support for US forces.

South Koreans don’t say they could not succeed, but rather seem uncertain as to what would be necessary to do so. Uncle Sam offers a convenient security blanket. They don’t want it to be unexpectedly ripped away.

Relationships with other nations also are on their minds. Ties to Japan are strained, one admitted. Almost everyone shares that assessment if not the term. On this issue Moon generally gets poor marks, except from members of his administration. Few see Russia as a serious factor, despite the recent Kim-Putin summit. One official confidently insisted that Kim asked for a lot and got virtually nothing from Moscow.

The assessment of China was more divided. Official, on-the-record opinion of Beijing’s cooperation is very high. Official, off-the-record comments were nearly as laudatory. Unofficial views ranged from mediocre to negative. These people generally believed that China was formally meeting its obligations while informally relaxing enforcement—simply looking the other way when smugglers ambled by.

Determining reality isn't easy. But one analyst pointed out that food prices in the North have been relatively stable, belying claims of significant shortages and suggesting extra supplies were coming from outside, most likely from China. Even if Beijing eased economic pressure on North Korea, no one views the two governments as bosom buddies. Indeed, one reason the latter wants a deal with America is to reduce its dependence on China.

As for the South's relations with China, they remain strained after the THAAD controversy. Washington received some blame for putting Seoul in a difficult position, but most criticism was of China. My interlocutors generally agreed that Beijing's policy had been short-sighted, demonstrating the PRC's lack of trustworthiness and pushing many South Koreans back toward America.

Ultimately, the most important factor in the politics surrounding the Korean Peninsula is Trump. For good or ill, he is setting the agenda for relations with North Korea and the status of the alliance. And that will continue at least through the end of next year. At which point it will be time for a return visit to South Korea!

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