

The Angler and the Octopus

Kim Jong-un's Ongoing Peace Offensive

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Ever since the United States divided the Korean peninsula in 1945, North Korea has had to cope with the existential challenge of U.S. hostility. Korea marks the western boundary of the empire, a border area where the sea power of the United States adjoins the land power of Russia and China. North Korea has been able to utilize this liminality to create a sovereign state – the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – whose independence is not welcomed by either Moscow or Beijing but tolerated because the alternatives, a client of the other or absorption into the U.S. empire, are considered worse. Washington, as global hegemon, has been less willing to tolerate this independence but has faced constraints. The result has been a policy of hostility, of unrelenting diplomatic and economic war of varying intensity, stopping short of actual kinetic war, though never far from it. The United States is frustrated by this situation, which is an affront to its hubris, but is restrained by the consequences. For North Korea, the situation is far more serious. Kinetic war would mean its destruction while the prevailing diplomatic and economic war produces its impoverishment – it is claimed that its per capita gross domestic product is less than 4 percent of that of South Korea.¹ For North Korea, the U.S. relationship is of paramount importance, the key to survival and prosperity.² For the United States, North Korea is but one part of the theater of politics, colorful but more fantasy than substance.

The so-called North Korean crisis occupies a special place in the U.S. political repertoire. Policy in the Middle East, and now Venezuela, is bedded in the strategic necessity of domination of oil supplies. The confrontation with the Soviet Union/Russia and China, whatever the distortions in the narrative may be, has a grounding in real geopolitical struggle against substantial adversaries. The North Korean crisis is different in that it is basically a *domestically constructed political issue* fueled by the specific geopolitical needs for tension in East Asia supplemented by the generic hunger of the military-industrial complex. It is not a real security issue in itself: North Korea is far too small to pose any real threat to

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the United States, other than limited and suicidal retaliation if attacked. But politics are often not firmly tethered to reality. Additionally, over generations, especially in recent decades, the myth of the North Korean threat has been nurtured by politicians, the military and security sector, and the media to assume an unchallenged authenticity of its own. Most presidents have felt compelled to “do something” about North Korea and this has fluctuated between threats (coercive diplomacy and the military option) and negotiations. Talks, however, were always doomed and designed to probably fail because they came with preconditions or demands that were inherently unacceptable to Pyongyang. The U.S. state bureaucracy tolerated failure in negotiations because there was no danger, and secretly welcomed it because the real problems would start with a resolution of the supposed crisis. Peace on the Korean peninsula would erode the U.S. military presence and forward strategy in East Asia, and negotiated peaceful coexistence with a defiantly independent North Korea on the basis of its nuclear deterrent might well encourage other countries to follow that path and undermine U.S. global hegemony. Over the years, U.S. negotiations with North Korea have manifested this tension between the president’s desire to “do something” and the state’s desire to “do nothing” in order to preserve the status quo. But the Donald Trump presidency presents a new dimension to the drama with its distinctive level of dissonance, reaching public antagonism, between the president and the wider state apparatus.

North Korea and the United States are so vastly different in historical experience, size, motivation, and governance that it is useful to see their relationship as a struggle between an angler, small but focused on the main task, and an octopus, gigantic and powerful but discordant and without a clear and unifying focus other than its voracious appetite.

The U.S. Octopus and the Child Emperor

Ernest Hemingway’s Old Man battled with a marlin, a giant fish longer than his own boat. The United States, in contrast, can be better considered an octopus for one main reason. Marlins, fish, and animals in general (both human and nonhuman) all have brains that basically control the rest of their bodies. The octopus is different: “Like humans, they have centralised nervous systems, but in their case there is no clear distinction between brain and body. An octopus’s neurons are dispersed throughout its body, and two-thirds of them are in its arms: each arm can act intelligently on its own, grasping, manipulating and hunting.”³ The octopus has a decentralized intelligence and decision-making system, which makes it a better analogy for the United States than a marlin.

The Trump administration has a very soft center that exacerbates, though did not create, the dysfunctional, uncoordinated octopoid nature of the state. The tentacles of this particular octopus are not merely large in relation to the governing and guiding center, they are also fundamentally disproportional. The physical infrastructure arm is decrepit, the part representing social services such as health is enervated, while that of the military and the wider so-called national security apparatus is grossly bloated.⁴ This is, again, not unique to the United States and long precedes Trump, although he has markedly worsened the state of affairs. The State Department, long the poor relation of U.S. foreign policy compared to the military, has been eviscerated.

So much has been written about Trump's psychology that there is no need to repeat it here. He is like a child emperor who is managed by devious and more knowledgeable courtiers, any of whom he can (and often does) banish on a whim.

No modern presidency has had as much opposition and pushback from the bureaucracy and the political elite in general, as articulated by much of the media and instrumentalized by Russiagate, as Trump. The fundamental, though unspoken, criticism of the foreign policy elite is that he does not understand that he is running an empire, not just a country. He does not value alliances and the soft power that is such an essential component of the empire. His knowledge is fragmentary and his strategy incoherent. He is not alone in that, but he takes these failings further than most.

However, it is Trump's very ignorance of his imperial role and his narcissistic, disheveled personality that paradoxically present a faint possibility of peace breaking out on the Korean peninsula. A cleverer president, such as Barack Obama, would not countenance peace, but Trump might just stumble across it. The chances are low but substantial enough to cause anguish across most of the foreign policy establishment. Nevertheless, there are indications that some, as we shall see, are looking for ways to mitigate the consequences so that, if Trump does succeed in "solving the North Korean crisis" and perhaps picking up a Nobel Peace Prize, the damage to U.S. hegemony in general and to geopolitical strategy in East Asia in particular will be limited.

Kim's Peace Offensive and Its Main Driver

The 2018 New Year's Address by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un ushered in remarkable new developments.⁵ He claimed that advances in North Korea's 2017 nuclear deterrence meant that "in no way would the United States dare to ignite a war against [him] and [his] country." It is likely that the confidence the deterrent provided formed the foundation that enabled him to launch the diplomatic peace offensive. The United

States portrays matters quite differently, claiming that “maximum pressure” has compelled Pyongyang to sue for peace on U.S. terms. Clearly, which driver – confidence or desperation – offers the better explanation is of utmost importance. If it is maximum pressure, that is, the intensification of economic and diplomatic warfare and the military threat, then its continuance and escalation where possible will bring victory: North Korea’s abandonment of its nuclear deterrent and whatever consequences might follow that. If the driver is confidence, both in the effectiveness of the nuclear deterrent and the ability to withstand U.S. pressure, then things will turn out differently: a refusal to buckle to U.S. demands leading to a stalemate in U.S.-North Korea negotiations, decreasing Chinese and Russian compliance with U.S. demands, and possibly a crisis in South Korea as South Korean president Moon Jae-in gets squeezed between aspirations for Korean détente and opposition to it from the United States.

Eighteen months after the launch of the offensive, it is increasingly clear that, in the words of Ruediger Frank, “North Korea Is Not Desperate.”⁶ Confidence in its deterrent and resilience to withstand maximum pressure has led to a transformation of the diplomatic landscape, increasing support from China and Russia and continued disarray among U.S. ranks.

The Angler Casts the Lure, Outflanking Washington and Utilizing Seoul

Kim unsuccessfully attempted a direct overture to Trump in 2017. In turn, this led to Trump’s bellicose threats. This time, however, Kim embarked on an outflanking maneuver, ignored Trump, and made the initial overture to Moon.

Moon had been swept into power by the Candlelight Revolution but, despite his rhetoric, it soon became clear that he was not going to make much progress on promoting peace on the peninsula. He was not strong enough to stand up to the United States or to the domestic conservative/military bloc. Since they had no interest in peace, except perhaps for the peace that follows conquest, as long as he was subservient to them, he would achieve little.⁷ And so it turned out.⁸ Indeed, Kim made this point in his address though he diplomatically refrained from naming Moon. He then played the Olympics card, suggesting that the North participate because “it is natural for us to share their pleasure over the auspicious event and help them.”⁹

The Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang in February 2018 were of great importance to South Korea. Kim’s offer was welcomed by progressives, and of course President Moon himself. The North’s participation was not something the United States or conservatives could publicly oppose, although they were clearly unhappy about it, hiding behind the argument that an excluded North Korea would somehow disrupt the games.

Thus began the diplomatic peace offensive of 2018. On February 10, 2018, Kim proposed a summit to Moon, who accepted. It took place at Panmunjom on the common border on April 27 of that year. While the relationship with the South is hugely important to North Korea, it is ultimately the United States that counts. The United States dominates South Korea – it is U.S. military power that threatens the independence of North Korea, and U.S. economic and diplomatic power that starves its people. Improving its relationship with the South, on its own, achieves little given Seoul’s limited freedom of action. Moon needs U.S. approval for virtually all aspects of the *détente*.¹⁰ Accordingly, Kim, like a boxer who jabs to the left then strikes on the right, made two overtures to the United States.

The Double Overture to the United States: Freeze and Summit

The first attracted little attention but was in fact of great importance, containing the kernel of a possible peace accord. On April 21, 2018, the DPRK announced, in a report given by Kim to the Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea (WPK), a unilateral moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests.¹¹ An earlier moratorium, entered into during the final days of Bill Clinton’s administration to promote dialogue, had been withdrawn in 2005 after the George W. Bush administration, having abrogated the Agreed Framework, showed little interest in meaningful negotiations.¹² The earlier moratorium was in effect before North Korea had tested a nuclear weapon (and would not have been if Bush had stuck to the Agreed Framework) or long-range missiles. This time was different. Kim claimed that tests were “no longer necessary” and that the task of constructing a deterrent was complete. The rhetoric masked a couple of significant issues.

All countries that have developed nuclear weapons have needed physical tests in the early stages. For example, the United States conducted over one thousand such tests. Israel is the only exception, presumably because the testing was done by those who provided the technology. The United States and other leading nuclear weapon states signed test-ban treaties because their technology had reached the stage where such tests were no longer necessary and testing could be conducted without an actual explosion in what are known as subcritical tests.¹³ On April 21, 2018, Kim declared that North Korea had conducted subcritical tests. While claims are not proof, they can establish a useful degree of ambiguity if they are credible, as this one seems to be.¹⁴

The second leg of the deterrent – long-range missiles – also offers uncertainty. The big issue is whether North Korea has mastered reentry technology. A warhead reentering the atmosphere needs to be protected against the extreme heat generated, otherwise it will be destroyed

before it reaches its target. Although Kim has claimed that this has been achieved, some foreign experts are skeptical.

Thus, the moratorium provides what might be termed an *ambiguity buffer*, which, as we shall see, may turn out to be highly significant in that it allows U.S. officials to accept a freeze on further tests and a cap on North Korea's nuclear program because it has not yet developed a real capacity to retaliate against the U.S. mainland.

The moratorium on tests also addresses a core component of the U.S. so-called North Korea crisis. As noted at the beginning of this article, North Korea does not pose a meaningful threat to the United States. This is irrespective of issues such as reentry capability. North Korea is just too small and, even if it had a handful of fully functioning nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), a unilateral attack is just not feasible. Nothing would be achieved—defeat, perhaps obliteration, would be inevitable. The threat of retaliation as a deterrent is one thing; an aggressive attack is quite another. The myth of the North Korean threat is a product of U.S. domestic politics generated over decades. It is a bogus fear accorded credibility partly by relentless propaganda, but also by the inevitable visibility of the development process. Nuclear and missile tests give politicians, officials, and the media a flag to wave; it is the testing of weapons rather than the weapons themselves that tends to attract political and hence public attention. This leads some to come up with what is called the Israel model of managing public perception, an issue to which we will return.¹⁵

However, it was the second overture that garnered by far the most attention. It was political theater pitched to a reality television host, and the bait was irresistible. Chung Eui-yong, Moon's national security advisor, went from meeting Kim in Pyongyang to Washington, where he invited the United States to a summit on behalf of Kim, to which Trump— who sees himself as a superb negotiator who can dare to tread, and win, where his predecessors did not—agreed.¹⁶

Will Kim succeed in doing what his father and grandfather failed to, that is, hooking the U.S. president to haul him in for serious negotiations about peaceful coexistence? Only time will tell, but the metaphor of the fisher catching a large creature with patience, guile, and perseverance and bringing it to shore offers insights.

The creature is large and strong, and the fishing line is relatively weak. If the fisher allows the prey to swim away, then eventually it will come to the end of the line and it will break. If the fisher hauls it in too impatiently, the creature will resist, again breaking the line. As Hemingway's Old Man says: "I could make the line fast. But then he could break it. I must hold him all I can and give him line when he must

have it.”¹⁷ Hemingway’s target was a marlin, but Kim’s is an octopus, a much more complicated creature.

The U.S. establishment reacted to Trump’s acceptance of the summit invitation with dismay, chagrin, frustration, and concern.¹⁸ Interestingly, disapproval was often couched in sexual terms as a homophobic delegitimization device: it was variously described as “bromance diplomacy” and “improvisational flirtation.”¹⁹

Establishment disapproval is only one part of the problem. The octopoid nature of the U.S. state is compounded by Trump’s incoherent presidential management. He does, after all, personally appoint key staff and, in this context, that means Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former National Security Advisor John Bolton, and Bolton’s recent replacement Robert O’Brien. No leader has a completely free hand and the pool of candidates is limited by various constraints. Nevertheless, the objective must be to have advisors who are broadly supportive of the leader’s vision – that is, if the leader has a vision at all, and it can be argued that Trump indeed does not. In this case, professed loyalty to Trump and a competitive disposition may be the most desired qualifications.²⁰

O’Brien’s position on Korea is as yet unclear, but he is likely to take his lead from Pompeo. At the time, Bolton was independent and deeply hostile to negotiations with North Korea (and any other country for that matter), far preferring to bully and threaten. He thrived on antagonism toward most of the rest of the world and the resulting tensions. Negotiated peace was not in his lexicon.

Pompeo, in contrast, is rather more difficult to pin down. His Middle East policy is clearly bedeviled by his evangelical Christianity, suggesting that God may have sent Trump to save Israel from Iran, but in respect to East Asia we might expect him to be more rational, pragmatic, and untroubled by any principles, as befits a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.²¹ Pompeo may entertain a deal if it were consistent with his strategy for preserving U.S. hegemony and, perhaps more importantly, his personal ambitions.

Pompeo and Bolton reportedly had conflicting visions and were natural rivals.²² The foreign policy establishment, military or civilian, has no compelling reason to support a settlement and will oppose it, as overtly or covertly as needed.

Thus, we have the U.S. octopus with the central brain exercising relatively little control over the tentacles, which are opposed to defusing tensions. Within the central brain, we have Trump: confused, narcissistic, and impulsive but also manipulable. And who better to manipulate him than advisors such as Pompeo, Bolton, O’Brien, and their ilk? It is often

claimed that Kim is tricking Trump, and while there is some truth to that, it also draws on a deep well of racial stereotyping that bears little relationship to historical reality.²³ All foreign leaders attempt to play the U.S. president – just think of Justin Trudeau, Theresa May, and Shinzō Abe – but with Trump success is ephemeral.²⁴

Kim has to try to maneuver Trump into a deal, but ultimately his agency, as that of any foreigner, is limited. The real and decisive struggles are always in Washington.²⁵ This is the key to understanding the political theater of the Trump-Kim summits.

Other Denizens in Korean Seas

The various countries in or adjoining East Asia have a strong interest in the tussle between the angler and the octopus, although there is diversity between them and ambivalence within them. Japan, especially under Abe, is keen to keep tensions high (though perhaps not boiling over) because it advances remilitarization and distracts the Japanese electorate from scandals at home.²⁶ China and Russia, despite the obvious differences between them, have an overarching commonality. They are both facing U.S. belligerence, desperate to avoid war with the United States or to put it off as long as possible, and willing to sacrifice North Korean interests for this strategic objective. However, as U.S./Western aggressiveness mounts – Russiagate, Skripal, South China Sea, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), trade war, Syria, Huawei, and so on – the case for appeasement in Korea or elsewhere is weakened and they are forced together.²⁷

Nevertheless, their position on Korea remains ambivalent, reflecting their weakness relative to the United States. Instead of taking a firm line against U.S.-led sanctions against North Korea in the UN Security Council – sanctions that are a clear violation both of the UN Charter and of the norms of international law – they have compromised and horse traded, using a strategy of watering down resolutions and then not implementing them rigorously.²⁸ This strategy has been employed in other conflict areas, especially in the Middle East, and the reasons are clear enough. Not merely are they much weaker militarily than the United States, but the Security Council is constructed in such a way that the United States is undefeatable. For instance, a Russian resolution condemning the April 14, 2018, missile attack on Syria by the United States, together with Britain and France, was easily defeated despite the attack being a blatant violation of international law and the UN Charter.²⁹ However, compromise yields the legal and moral high ground to the United States, whose sense of entitlement and exceptionalism is thereby reinforced and its intransigence, not least regarding Korea, strengthened. U.S. commandeering of

the Security Council is one of the great triumphs of its foreign policy in that it greatly magnifies and legitimizes U.S. aggression. U.S. sanctions become UN sanctions and countries around the world reluctantly or enthusiastically implement U.S. power to starve North Korea into submission; some 40 percent of its people “struggle with food insecurity and undernutrition and lack of access to basic services.”³⁰ This in the name of the United Nations and the so-called international community.

South Korea between Autonomy and Subservience

South Korea is a very special case. It was created by the United States in 1945 as a client state, hewed from the detritus of the Japanese empire as a bulwark protecting subjugated Japan against contagion from the Eurasian mainland. As a linchpin of U.S. East Asia strategy, it benefited in many ways from its subservience to the United States, receiving massive aid and access to the U.S. market (to Trump’s later regret).³¹ But benefits can also be bonds. Despite considerable economic and social growth, it is still a long way from independence. Its military is under U.S. control during wartime, but does any other time really matter?³² The deployment of THAAD, whose radar provides surveillance of Chinese ICBM launch sites but whose interceptors provide little defense against North Korea in the event of war, is just one example of South Korea’s interests being sacrificed to U.S. strategic objectives.³³ However, South Korea’s history can also be viewed as an ongoing struggle, with successes and setbacks, to wrest autonomy and eventual independence from the United States. Moon exemplifies this conflict, partly inner, partly public, between subservience and rebellion.

And there are two ways in which Moon is seeking a path out of this dilemma. After initial hesitation, he responded to Kim’s invitation for a summit. The meeting went well and others followed, but the limited power of the two Koreas to achieve much under the shadow of the United States suggests that the extravagant hope of observers such as David Kang that their initial summit “will be more important than any meeting between Kim and U.S. President Donald Trump” is fanciful.³⁴ Moon is also seeking to be an intermediary between Washington and Pyongyang, but this pretension is becoming increasingly hollow despite much wishful thinking in South Korea, illustrated particularly by the liberal newspaper *Hankyoreh*.³⁵

The Racist Trope of the Fiendishly Clever Oriental

It is quite common to describe Kim, along with his father and grandfather before him, as fiendishly clever, in the way that “devious Orientals” are often portrayed in supposed contradistinction to Westerners, who are portrayed as forthright and honest. As Bruce Cumings, among others, has

pointed out, “cunning and shrewd are standard adjectives in stereotypes of Asians.”³⁶ There are many variations on the theme and an extensive literature going back hundreds of years.

The North Korean negotiating team is much more experienced, disciplined, and focused than its U.S. counterpart. For instance, Kim Myong-gil, the current lead negotiator, has worked on negotiations with the United States since the Agreed Framework talks in the early 1990s and lives in New York, working at the DPRK mission to the United Nations. There is no one on the U.S. side that comes near to matching his experience. Nevertheless, the strategy is not devilishly cunning. For one thing, there are not many options for a small country trying to defend itself against the belligerent U.S. behemoth. Foreign analysts often construct fanciful justifications to explain away what is, essentially, a fairly obvious response to imperialist aggression. However, Pyongyang can make some choices and there are a number of ways in which it could do better. It could improve its communications. As Harold Pinter has pointed out, the “United States is without doubt the greatest show on the road” when it comes to propaganda, and while North Korea does not have the resources and power to match, it need not be as inept as it is.³⁷ It could, for example, make better use of the UN Charter; the United States may be able to bully and bribe the United Nations as an institution but it cannot do so with the founding document. The Charter may be continually broached, but it is clear that North Korea is broadly compliant and the United States frequently in violation – a point that should be forcefully reiterated, preferably in liaison with countries in a similar position.³⁸

Denuclearization: The Confucian Albatross

The main problem with North Korea’s diplomatic strategy, and one for which lack of power and resources is no excuse, is the centrality of the term *denuclearization*. What North Korea wants is peaceful coexistence with the United States. It needs, as it has frequently stated, the United States to drop its hostility policy, cease economic and diplomatic warfare, remove the military threat, live in regular diplomatic and economic intercourse with the DPRK, and recognize, as a member of the United Nations should, its legitimacy and sovereignty. Denuclearization does not address any of these issues but rather diverts attention from them.

Denuclearization plays into U.S. hands because however much North Korea might talk about “denuclearization of the Korean peninsula,” of turning the Korean peninsula “into a land of peace free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threats,” and indeed of bilateral or global disarmament, the United States has a much louder megaphone.³⁹ However many

times North Korea may reiterate that it will not countenance unilateral disarmament, for most people that is what the negotiations are all about.⁴⁰

The North Korean proposal for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is confusingly vague, at least in public discourse. Does it just cover land-based weapons or also those of the sea? If so, how far away? Does it include the U.S. nuclear umbrella?⁴¹ Moreover, does a geographical limit make any sense in a world where nuclear weapons have been a strategic weapon to be delivered from a great distance and, since the 1960s, from the U.S. mainland itself? Here, the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula suffers from the same yawning fallacy as proposals for a Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone: if the major nuclear power involved, the United States, can strike targets within the zone from anywhere in the world, then the nuclear-free zone offers no protection.⁴²

The North Korean emphasis on nuclear weapons is also misplaced. If the United States does invade North Korea, it will be by using what is now the standard procedure – U.S. airpower, local ground troops, and special forces for decapitation and asset seizure – not nuclear weapons, which are primarily a deterrent or, if used aggressively, would be employed only against large, indigestible countries such as Russia and China.

Furthermore, and with deep irony, there has been a transformation of the nuclear weapons calculus since 1945. Then, nuclear weapons were the sole prerogative of the richest of the rich: the United States. They have since become a great leveler, potentially protecting the weak against the powerful, which is why the United States is so concerned about proliferation.⁴³

For all these reasons, North Korea allowing denuclearization to occupy center stage of negotiations is very unwise.

How has it come to pass? The answer would seem to lie in an undue Confucian deference to Kim Il-sung, who was particularly concerned about the nuclear threat. In the late 1970s, the United States had about seven hundred tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.⁴⁴ And in the 1970s it was South Korea, not North Korea, that was developing nuclear weapons.⁴⁵ Changing circumstances should produce new, appropriate strategies, but North Korean thinking is still trapped in the past.

The Political Theater of Summitry and Pushback

Kim Jong-un's diplomatic offensive unleashed a flurry of summits: three with Trump, three with Moon, five with Xi Jinping, and one with Vladimir Putin.⁴⁶ These attracted a huge amount of media attention, especially because of their rarity and theatricality. The leader of North Korea had met with counterparts in the Soviet Union/Russia, China, and to a lesser extent South Korea over the years, but the Singapore summit was a historic first.

Summits are, by their nature, theatrical and imbued with symbolism. Summits within the imperial framework, such as those between the United States and South Korea, carry little weight, although the minor power naturally attempts to inflate their importance. A summit with an independent, even adversarial, leader is quite another matter. Since the United States is the global hegemon and far more powerful than any other country, there is always opposition to presidential meetings with other leaders, even of large countries such as the Soviet Union/Russia and China. To have such a meeting with a small, defiant country such as North Korea was unthinkable until Trump came along. A summit accords legitimacy to a foreign leader, the argument goes, and legitimacy should only be bestowed on the obedient, or in the cant phraseology, a “member of the international community,” not a rogue regime. Bolton spoke for many when he said: “There’s no way we should give North Korea a peace treaty. They’re lucky to have a meeting with the president of the United States.”⁴⁷

Bilateral summits are worth more than multilateral ones or those that take place as an adjunct to an international meeting, and the location has great significance. The host gains added stature and if neither side gives way, then a third location – Singapore or Hanoi – is a compromise solution.

Summits are choreographed and scripted, with the substantive discussions remaining private and, if things go according to plan (which they did in Singapore but not in Hanoi), a joint statement, usually anodyne, is crafted by officials from both sides and signed by the leaders. Leaking is very much in the U.S. tradition, but leaks are done for a purpose and may well present a distorted version of what has been agreed in private.

Much of the importance of summits is the reaction of power elites to what was agreed, and what is thought to have been agreed, or to the very fact that the meeting took place at all. This has been particularly the case in the Trump-Kim summits, where pushback from the establishment has dominated the media coverage and hence public awareness.

The difficulty of ascertaining the significance of these summits is compounded by the indecipherability of Trump himself. When Kim described a letter from Trump as “excellent” and is reportedly “appreciating the political judging faculty and extraordinary courage of President Trump,” it is clear, despite the stilted translation, that he is encouraging Trump to continue the dialogue despite opposition from the elite. Trump’s unscripted words and his tweets display, on the surface at least, an astounding lack of understanding of the issues. He is like a 5-year-old, wandering through a conference of weapons manufacturers and generals, admiring the baubles, dazzled by the toys, but not really comprehending what the adults are talking about.

The *Washington Post* reported thus on Trump's comments about Kim in May 2019, after North Korea had tested some short-range missiles and just after the Department of Justice (with or without his approval) seized North Korea's second largest ship, the *Wise Honest*, as it traveled toward Indonesia:

But Trump portrayed the North Korean dictator as a leader who believes, as the president himself said he does, that his country has "tremendous economic potential," but who understands he can't develop it while still pursuing his nuclear ambitions.

"He knows that with nuclear, that's never going to happen, only bad can happen," Trump said. "He understands. He is a very smart man; he gets it."

The president – a former real estate developer – also cast Kim's opportunities through the lens of his previous passion. North Korea, the president said, is "located between Russia and China on one side, and South Korea on the other. It's all waterfront property. It's a great location, as we used to say in the real estate business."⁴⁸

The downside of great locations, as Trump's father exemplified, is that they attract predators. Korea's location has been the prime reason that it has attracted the attention of imperialists over the years, be they Mongolian, Japanese, or American. And unilateral disarmament is not the solution to that problem.⁴⁹ However, it seems that behind the clichés many of the adults, if we take the *Washington Post* as representing them, do not understand much either.

The Singapore Summit successfully brought together, for the first time, the leaders of the United States and North Korea. It produced a joint statement that was suitably aspirational and vague, with the potential to peacefully defuse tension in East Asia.

So successful was it in this regard that it unleashed a torrent of backlash as the various tentacles of the octopus signaled their disapproval. The military, current and former officials, the security industry incorporating the intelligence community, and most think tanks all prophesized doom if peace broke out.⁵⁰ Various state agencies, notably the Treasury and Department of Justice, did what they always do in such circumstances – they took action in an attempt to derail any peace process.⁵¹ In South Korea, the conservatives were particularly worried by the prospect of a U.S. rapprochement with Pyongyang allowing Moon's détente to move forward and perhaps establish a peace regime that would erode their power.⁵²

The mainstream media, in the United States and the West generally, acted as a cheerleader, collator, and disseminator of the pushback process. Perhaps the most prominent and flagrant ploy was to accuse North Korea of not honoring commitments that it had not actually made given that the Singapore statement was intentionally vague. Naturally, no mention was made of U.S. failure

to promote the peace process, nor of its attempts to hinder and prohibit, through its control of the so-called United Nations Command (not in fact a UN body), inter-Korean détente.⁵³ There were, however, occasional chinks in the propaganda curtain. For instance, CNN's Will Ripley demolished the cheating accusation and injected a dose of reality—U.S. demands for “complete denuclearization” upfront was “a nonstarter for a nation that remains deeply suspicious of the outside world and would never leave itself strategically vulnerable simply for the promise of economic gain.”⁵⁴ So much for Trump's real-estate fantasies. However, Ripley was very much a lone figure in the media landscape.

The campaign to demolish Trump's idiosyncratic and confused peace negotiation had a natural, if unexpected, culmination in the Hanoi Summit. It was widely and reasonably supposed that this would follow the Singaporean format of happy photos and a joint statement of vague promise. It would be the calm before the storm and the real battle would be in Washington.⁵⁵ That a further attempt to derail negotiations would be made was no surprise, but the fact that it happened in Hanoi and not later in Washington was. It is generally supposed that the botching was deliberately engineered by Bolton with possible assistance from Pompeo. According to Japanese analyst Kuni Miyake:

When Trump was scheduled to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Vietnam, Bolton seems to have been successful in convincing—probably with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—him that he should walk out of the negotiation room unless Kim agreed to the so-called big deal based on the Libyan nuclear agreement of 2004.⁵⁶

Trump's incomprehension about the issues, in particular what would be acceptable to the Koreans, and his susceptibility to being manipulated is clear enough, but it remains a mystery why he allowed himself to be publicly shafted. Perhaps he saw it as part of his unpredictability shtick and confirmation, in his eyes at least, that he was a smart negotiator who could walk away from a deal today to get a better one tomorrow.

The bungled summit at Hanoi led to a stalemate. It seemed that the establishment had won, that the octopus would be untrammelled by the dangers of reducing tension in Korea and invigorated by the rapidly deteriorating relationship with China, Iran, Venezuela, and Russia.

Shards of Hope in the Detritus of Hanoi

Gearing up for the 2020 presidential election, Trump needed something to tout as a foreign policy success. The confrontation with China was, predictably, producing all sorts of unwelcome consequences. The attempted coup in Venezuela had stalled. Fulminating against Iran was all very well, but Trump had a healthy fear of being dragged into another land war in

the Middle East, and with a much more formidable adversary than Iraq or Afghanistan. When he was nearly maneuvered into an attack on Iran, he blinked. He became increasingly wary of Bolton and his penchant for war.⁵⁷

Kim took various steps to rescue the situation, attempting to draw the United States into meaningful negotiations but also continuing to prepare for the likelihood that the line would be broken and that the octopus, rather than being drawn into peaceful coexistence, would break free and resume the attack. On April 13 of this year, he gave a major policy speech before the Supreme People's Assembly, in which he said, *inter alia*:

At the second DPRK-U.S. summit, we expressed our decision to take more prudent and trustworthy measures after setting stages and courses indispensable for the implementation of the June 12 DPRK-U.S. Joint Statement and expected a response from the U.S. to it.

But the U.S. came to the talks, only racking its brains to find ways that are absolutely impracticable....

But as President Trump keeps saying, the personal ties between me and him are not hostile like the relations between the two countries and we still maintain good relations, as to be able to exchange letters asking about health anytime if we want.

If the U.S. adopts a correct posture and comes forward for the third DPRK-U.S. summit with a certain methodology that can be shared with us, we can think of holding one more talk.

However, what I feel now is if there will be any need to keep an attachment to the summit with the U.S. just because of the issue of sanctions relief.

Anyway, we will wait for a bold decision from the U.S. with patience till the end of this year but I think it will definitely be difficult to get such a good opportunity as the previous summit....

Only when...written content favorable for the interests of both sides and acceptable to each other [is provided], I will sign the agreement without reserve.⁵⁸

While he set December 31 as an ultimatum date, Kim did not specify exactly what measures the DPRK would take if the United States did not return to negotiations in good faith and agree to a mutually acceptable compromise, merely warning of "another path."⁵⁹ He cautioned that sanctions relief, though welcome, was not the essential issue. As a subsequent Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement reiterated, the hostility policy was "the root cause that pushed [North Korea] into a nuclear state."⁶⁰

In early May, after the beginning of the first round of joint U.S.-Republic of Korea military exercises labeled Dong Maeng (Alliance), North Korea tested some short-range ballistic missiles. These did not violate the self-imposed moratorium on testing long-range missiles but were a warning that the moratorium was contingent on U.S. movement toward peace.⁶¹

If that was a stick, then maintaining and developing the personal relationship with Trump was the carrot. This was done by an exchange of letters:

on June 11, 2019, Trump received what he described as “a beautiful letter” from Kim and, in return, Kim received “an excellent letter” from Trump containing “interesting proposals.” These were not specified, but Kim complimented the U.S. president for his “political judging faculty and extraordinary courage.”⁶² This strange and surprising bonhomie between what not so long ago were the “Rocket Man” and the “dotard” remains a fascinating mystery. On the Korean side, it is clearly instrumental, for all foreign leaders must try to cultivate a good relationship with U.S. presidents, whatever they might privately think of them. For Trump, it is probably more psychological than political, reflecting his sense of insecurity.⁶³ Perhaps now that Trump has a new best friend as British Prime Minister – he describes Boris Johnson as “Britain[’s] Trump,” and there can be no higher accolade – the relationship with Kim will become less significant.⁶⁴ As the veteran Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has pointed out, personal relationships can be important but they are subsidiary to political imperatives.⁶⁵ North Korea’s recently promoted First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui has described the Trump-Kim relationship as “mysteriously wonderful.”⁶⁶ Mysterious it certainly is, but given Trump’s volatility and the underlying thrust of U.S. policy, how long it will remain wonderful and to what effect is another matter.

Kim meanwhile has continued his campaign to improve relations with Russia and China to considerable success, at least in terms of political theater and symbolism. These visible aspects are very important, but the longer-term impact can be difficult to ascertain and the vital private discussions, agreements, and, more crucially, disagreements are below the surface and we can only speculate about them. For instance, the long-awaited summit between Putin and Kim that finally took place in Vladivostok from April 24 to 26 produced talk about “international security guarantees” with Russia as one of the guarantors.⁶⁷ This sent a warning to Washington – which unfortunately has a propensity not to hear, and certainly not to heed, advice – that the security of the DPRK was the key issue in which Russia, and by implication China, were vitally interested. However, security guarantees, Nuclear Weapons Free Zones, and peace treaties are ultimately only scraps of paper whose validity is contingent on political power and interest – and “a piece of paper is not going to do it.”⁶⁸ The United States can give a reasonably dependable security guarantee to the likes of Japan and South Korea because it is so much stronger than any possible challenger, and would usually quite relish the opportunity to go to war. But neither Russia nor China is in that position in relation to the United States. The credibility of their guarantees would depend on the degree to which U.S. action, say against the DPRK, directly threatened them. However, Putin and Kim no doubt also discussed how U.S. and U.S.-led Security Council

sanctions could be circumvented, especially in relation to Korean migrant workers in Russia, though their economic importance is debated.⁶⁹

Xi's visit to Pyongyang on June 20 and 21 was a diplomatic coup for Kim, being the first with President Xi on Korean soil. It was also a snub to South Korea, which had been talking for some time of a visit from Xi, only to have it postponed. Again, the symbolism of the public event was important, giving increased domestic prestige to Kim and putting pressure on the United States to move forward with negotiations. Presumably, both leaders discussed in private how to deal with the U.S. problem, which for the Chinese has greatly increased in virulence with attacks on Huawei and the trade war, though it has not reached the existential level felt by North Korea. The summit was yet another reminder that U.S. Korea policy must be analyzed within the context of the struggle to retain hegemony against China.⁷⁰

The North's relationship with the South remained in a state of suspended animation. Moon's inability to stand up to the United States and implement the Panmunjom Declaration was manifested in numerous ways. Continued joint military exercises, the deployment of F-35s (aimed more at China than North Korea), the failure to reopen the inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Park, and the decision to build an aircraft carrier – an offensive weapons system par excellence – all added to the souring of the relationship.⁷¹ Although there was no formal break, Pyongyang made its displeasure known most tellingly in advising Seoul to stay out of its negotiations with Washington because its subservience had invalidated its role as intermediary, suggesting that “it's better for the South Korean authorities to mind their own business at home.”⁷²

One of South Korea's recurring nightmares is being sidelined in the U.S. treatment of Asia, which was one reason that Moon was so keen to assume the role of intermediary between Trump and Kim. But, again, South Korea was shunted to one side, in this case because of its failure to assert independence. Moon was not an honest broker, respected by both sides, but merely a messenger disdained by both. The most pressing political problem for Moon at the moment is the dispute with Japan over reparations for forced labor during the colonial period, which has led to Abe retaliating by imposing export controls on inputs vital to South Korea's electronics industry.⁷³ South Korea knows full well that, as in the past, if the United States has to choose between its two Northeast Asian clients, it will choose Japan.⁷⁴ Whether these travails will break Moon or steel him to take a more independent role rather than just courting Trump is as yet unknown.

While developments with respect to Russia, China, and South Korea, and Kim's perseverance and angling skill are important, Washington's decisions are ultimately what count. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the U.S. “North Korea crisis” is primarily a domestic political issue. It has

little military importance in itself (since the North Korea threat is bogus), but it does have serious implications for U.S. global hegemony and its forward strategy against China and Russia.

The American Octopus: Surface Convulsions, Internal Machinations

The octopoid nature of the U.S. state has manifested in various ways. To begin with, there have been continued rogue actions by state organs. In particular, a New York Federal District Court allowed the sale of the North Korean ship *Wise Honest*, which had been seized by the United States in May on the grounds that it had infringed Security Council sanctions. The U.S. court decreed that it could be sold and the proceeds given to the U.S. Warmbier family.⁷⁵ Otto Warmbier was a student given an inordinately long sentence for a petty but symbolic crime in North Korea, in a mechanism somewhat similar to the U.S. plea bargaining system.⁷⁶ He died, probably as the result of a botched suicide attempt, after being repatriated to the United States.⁷⁷ The unfortunate Warmbier became a cause célèbre much seized upon, not least by Trump. The actions of different parts of the U.S. state in the *Wise Honest* affair were clearly in violation of international law, but politically were somewhat different. The seizure might be seen as part of a deep state maneuver to derail U.S.-North Korea negotiations, while the District Court decision was probably more an expression of arrogant, exceptionalist extraterritoriality. The octopus has many tentacles.

The thing that naturally captured the most attention was Trump's invitation to Kim to meet at Panmunjom – a stratagem very much in the Trump style. He outmaneuvered his minders (Bolton was sent to Mongolia for the day) and asserted his presidential authority, securing much media coverage in the process.⁷⁸ He became the first sitting U.S. president to stand in North Korea, a joke which no journalist should resist.⁷⁹ The pundits shook their heads and the Democratic Party presidential candidates were apoplectic.⁸⁰

On the face of it, Trump had broken the logjam and broken through the stalemate. There is some truth to this, including that the renewed contact with Kim (not quite a formal summit) opened up possibilities that Bolton's derailing of the Hanoi summit had seemed to close off. But perhaps more important than this glittering, newsworthy, and theatrical spectacle, is a *New York Times* article entitled "In New Talks, U.S. May Settle for a Nuclear Freeze by North Korea," which appeared on the same day, June 30. In it, authors Michael Crowley and David Sanger claimed that in the weeks leading up to the demilitarized zone meeting,

a real idea has been taking shape inside the Trump administration that officials hope might create a foundation for a new round of negotiations.

The concept would amount to a nuclear freeze, one that essentially enshrines the status quo, and tacitly accepts the North as a nuclear power, something administration officials have often said they would never stand for....

While the approach could stop that arsenal from growing, it would not, at least in the near future, dismantle any existing weapons, variously estimated at 20 to 60. Nor would it limit the North's missile capability.⁸¹

The article was important not merely because of what it said, but also because of who wrote it and for whom.

Sanger earned his nickname Scoop Sanger in the 1990s from his success in publishing journalistic scoops deriving from his role as a mouthpiece for elements of the intelligence community that wanted to influence government policy.⁸² It was Sanger who coauthored what was probably the most influential 2018 article – “In North Korea, Missile Bases Suggest a Great Deception” – as part of the pushback against the Singapore Summit.⁸³ The obvious inaccuracies in the article and its agenda were so egregious that the executive editor of the *Hankyoreh*, South Korea's leading liberal newspaper, wrote a personal open letter to his *New York Times* counterpart in protest.⁸⁴

The freeze proposal elaborated in “In New Talks, U.S. May Settle for a Nuclear Freeze by North Korea” has been around for some time, stretching back to the 1990s. In 2015, North Korea proposed a freeze on nuclear testing in exchange for a U.S. suspension of its huge military exercises with South Korea.⁸⁵ The Chinese took this up in their peace proposal of 2017.⁸⁶ The United States constantly rebuffed the proposal, presumably regarding the exercises not merely as an indispensable preparation for a possible invasion of the North but also presenting the most opportune time to do so when troops were mobilized, tensions were high, and an incident could easily be manufactured to blame North Korea for the outbreak of hostilities.⁸⁷

The idea of a freeze on testing overlaps with the concept of capping North Korea's nuclear deterrent so it would continue to exist but not be expanded or exported. The main proponent of this has been Siegfried Hecker, the U.S. nuclear scientist who coined the term *three nos* – no more bombs, no better bombs, and no export.⁸⁸ The suggestion has been taken up by, among others, William Perry and James Mattis.⁸⁹ Hecker claims that it was first proposed to him on a visit to North Korea in 2006 by officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹⁰

The capping proposal could form the basis for a resolution of the issue. From the North Korean side, it has the drawback that it probably leaves the deterrent program incomplete and not thoroughly tested. However, certainty is a luxury that North Korea can forgo in the circumstances. Since the country is, unlike China or Russia, a low-value target, it merely has to attain a level of perceived risk that would deter a U.S. attack. U.S. destruction of China would leave the world at its feet and would, in

some eyes, justify considerable risk; the conquest of North Korea would achieve little and would remove a rationale for its forward position in Asia. Even the possibility that the Koreans might be able to retaliate with an ICBM would, in rational calculation, militate against attack.

The U.S. position on capping is more complex. As noted, the so-called North Korean crisis is essentially a domestic political issue (with some international implications) of perception rather than a military threat. However, this is not how it is usually portrayed, to a large degree because the officials, generals, politicians, and experts whose opinions dominate the media are dependent on the perception of external threat for their income. As a domestic political issue, it becomes a battleground between Democrats and Republicans, and those within the parties jostling for power.

Crowley and Sanger's article is so important because it looks like kite-flying by powerful forces within the Trump administration. The run-up to the 2020 presidential election has begun. Russiagate has had a slow death, but even the Democrats have acknowledged that the Mueller investigation has failed to deliver.⁹¹ In his bid for reelection, Trump will face fierce opposition from the Democrats. Although he has the advantages of incumbency and the immigration issue, the state of the economy over the next year is uncertain and he is beset by numerous foreign policy problems. To appear to solve the North Korean crisis where his predecessors failed would be very welcome. Where Obama left the country in peril, Trump could point out that, on his watch, there have been no more North Korean nuclear and missile tests, none will happen in the future, and the country is now safe. The fact that the United States was not in danger and that his predecessors did not fail because their policies produced desirable tension in East Asia, kept Japan and South Korea in line, and bolstered the containment of China is of no relevance and those consciously responsible would not admit it. It would be a variant of the Israel model of management of perception rather than reality. With no tests, people would forget today the weapons they had been so frightened about yesterday.⁹²

Trump would also claim that the deal with North Korea proves that he is a great negotiator and that building a relationship with Kim was something that only a person with his qualities could achieve. He ventured where lesser presidents feared to tread.

In reality, the freeze/capping proposal has been around for decades, but the United States had not responded. Times have changed and, in this very unequal contest, in North Korea's favor. North Korea has achieved a sufficiently credible deterrent, with the ambiguity buffer allowing some maneuvering within the U.S. military establishment. North Korea's relationships with the South, Russia, and especially China have greatly improved. It has shown reliance in the face of vicious economic and diplomatic warfare.

Kim has played the angler's role with skill. North Korea has engaged with the U.S. octopus in a way that has evaded it in the past. What happens now depends on struggles within the octopus. Korean overtures are contingent on U.S. reciprocity and, if Washington does not begin addressing the key issues of security and sanctions, privately if not publicly, then Pyongyang will disengage, probably seeking sanctuary within the bosom of China and Russia as the new Cold War intensifies.

Convulsions in the Trump administration in September 2019 may signal a possible breakthrough in Korea policy in the run-up to the 2020 elections. The defenestration of the independent-minded Bolton and his replacement by O'Brien is significant not so much in terms of policy but in relationships. O'Brien shares Bolton's enthusiasm for bellicose imperialism and has worked under him, but he is reportedly less personally abrasive and less adventurist.⁹³ Bolton's dismissal was widely welcomed in much of the establishment (not least in the Pentagon, where "there were cheers"). Although O'Brien is a firm advocate for strengthening the U.S. Navy to counter China, he has shown no inclination to precipitate war.⁹⁴ He has published little on Korea and his book, *While America Slept*, while an attack on the Obama administration, contains little beyond standard clichéd references.⁹⁵

Bolton and Pompeo were often in dispute and, in fact, O'Brien was one of Pompeo's suggestions for a replacement. The rumored promotion of Stephen E. Biegun, U.S. Special Representative for North Korea, to Deputy Secretary of State, replacing a Rex Tillerson appointee, also strengthens Pompeo's hold on U.S. foreign policy.⁹⁶ This leaves U.S. Korea policy essentially unchanged but subtly different. If Pompeo decides that a capping deal will improve Trump's reelection prospects, and if he decides that will advance his own personal ambitions, then he is in a stronger position to make this happen.

The Biegun appointment suggests a focus on Korea, which makes sense. The Trump administration is beset with problems at home with threatened impeachment and falling polls, and abroad with multiple challenges to hegemony. Despite all the brouhaha about the difficulty of negotiating with North Korea, it is in fact the most manageable of U.S. foreign policy issues. North Korea is strategic, flexible, would probably accept a "capping" compromise, and poses no military threat. With the rise of China and increased hostility, it is no longer as important as it used to be as a pretext for furthering military presence in Asia. It is essentially a matter of domestic political infighting and perception management. The establishment might be unhappy to cede a perceived success to Trump, but might cede one to Pompeo if he is seen as the best restraint on Trump and as a future "safe" president. However, whether such a peace settlement will prevail against hostility in the mass of the wider octopus remains unlikely and, at best, uncertain.

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