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Will South Korea's Moon Defy Trump and Improve Relations with North Korea?



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North Korea is in the news again. As always, that means that it is time for mainstream journalists and establishment figures to reach for the handy cliché and to recycle received opinion as a substitute for thought. Terms like “provocation,” “threat,” and “aggression” abound. Not surprisingly, powerful political and military actors in the United States are seizing the opportunity offered by strained inter-Korean relations to try and kill any

prospect of reengagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK – the official name for North Korea).

In the eyes of nearly all U.S. politicians, military contractors, think tank analysts, and mainstream journalists, the release of former National Security Advisor John Bolton's memoir could not have arrived at a better time. Bolton played a key role in torpedoing the Hanoi Summit by demanding that North Korea relinquish its biological and chemical weapons, despite the lack of evidence that the DPRK even has such programs. That was coupled with his insistence that North Korea adopt the Libya model of denuclearization, in which the DPRK would give up everything and receive nothing in return other than vague assurances. For Bolton, sinking the Hanoi Summit was a job half-done. With his memoir, he hopes to complete the task and smother the very concept of reengagement, a message that is predictably finding a receptive ear among so many in Washington.

President Trump's willingness to meet with Chairman Kim Jong-un had suggested the potential for progress on the Korean Peninsula. For a time, Trump was open to dialogue but he remained wedded to the standard establishment line that the sole purpose of talks should be to negotiate the terms of North Korea's surrender. In essence, it now appears that there was more continuity than change in Trump's policy. Both former President Obama and Trump waged economic warfare on the North Korean people through sanctions, and both sought unilateral concessions. Where they differed was in whether issuing demands in face-to-face meetings needed to be added to the mix.

At one point, U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun responded to criticisms of American intransigence by suggesting that the United States might consider offering compensation to North Korea in exchange for denuclearization. The possibilities he mentioned included agreeing to the two nations opening liaison offices in each other's capital, permitting a few people-to-people talks, and humanitarian aid. There was also the thought that the United States might be willing to sign a declaration acknowledging that the Korean War came to an end in 1953. What is notable about all of these proposals is that they would provide nothing that North Korea truly needs. Sanctions would remain in place. Nor would there be a security guarantee to the DPRK that would allow it to feel safe enough to dismantle its nuclear deterrent. Also missing was normalization of relations.

Undoubtedly, there is ample reason to question Bolton's veracity in his self-justifying memoir. But there is at least one passage that has the ring of plausibility. Bolton claims that he began to suspect that the end-of-war declaration was Moon's idea. That impression was confirmed in talks with the North Koreans, who "had told us they didn't care about it, seeing it as something Moon wanted," and they also "worried about Moon's pitching Trump on these bad ideas." [1]

Kim Myong-gil, North Korea's chief negotiator in denuclearization talks, firmly rejected Biegun's offer of purely symbolic measures. "If the U.S. believes that it can lure us to the table with secondary issues, such as an end-of-war declaration – which can instantly end up as garbage depending on the political situation – and the establishment of a liaison office, instead of presenting fundamental solutions to withdraw its hostile policy against North Korea, which interferes with our right to survival and development, there will never be any hope for a solution." [2]

However, reciprocity is not a word in the Washington lexicon, so talks remained stymied. Trump is currently distracted as the electoral campaign ramps up and in his criminal mismanagement of the COVID-19 virus. The mood on Capitol Hill and in the media is unrelentingly hostile to the resumption of talks, and it is difficult to envision a reelected Trump being open to reengagement in a more even-handed manner. Nor can hope for an improved U.S.-DPRK relationship be placed in a Joe Biden presidency. In a campaign video, Biden declared, "The first thing we have to do is start to demonstrate to the American public that we're no longer embracing the Kim Jong-uns and the thugs of the world...We are the United States of America. We lead by our example. We're back. That's the most critical thing that is going to have to be done." [3]

The writing, then, is clearly on the wall. North Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Ri Son Gwon issued a statement on June 12, in which he pointed out that "the hope for improved DPRK-U.S. relations...has now been shifted into despair," and "even a slim ray of optimism for peace and prosperity...has faded away." [4]

Trump's inability or unwillingness to think beyond the ossified constraints of the Washington Establishment's mindset ensured that talks could only end in failure. The North Koreans have taken due note of the Trump administration's rigidity and have essentially given up hope for better relations.

Instead, the North Koreans focused their attention where there seemed more potential for improvement, and that was with inter-Korean relations. They hoped for measures such as

establishing economic projects of mutual benefit and the cessation of military exercises aimed at each other. But here, too, the DPRK met with disappointment, as progress with South Korea remained stalled.

Mainstream media tell us that by severing communication links with the south and setting off an explosion at the Joint Liaison Office in Kaesong, North Korea is 'lashing out' and 'raising tensions,' due to economic problems or as a message to encourage Trump to resume negotiations.

In reality, these gestures are intended as a wake-up call to the Moon administration to prod him into returning to the commitments he signed in the Panmunjom Declaration. North-south relations have been in the doldrums for quite some time now, and the DPRK's repeated requests for cooperation in advancing inter-Korean relations have invariably failed to move Moon into action.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in recognizes the need for warmer relations between the two Koreas, and some of Moon's ideas for bringing the two Koreas closer together, such as his proposal for a Northeast Asian Railway Initiative, [5] have considerable merit. Yet, all of his plans remain undisturbed on the shelf, collecting dust.

The problem is that, as much as Moon may care about inter-Korean relations, the U.S.-South Korean alliance is more important to him. Moon insists that the UN economic sanctions on North Korea, which the U.S. devised, prevent him from implementing many of his plans. On every matter concerning cooperation with North Korea, whether large or small, Moon feels compelled to first ask for permission from the United States, and the answer is always no. It is due to Moon's timidity that inter-Korean relations have failed to progress beyond initial steps.

Moon's pronouncements are indicative of his frame of mind. In a meeting with senior secretaries on April 27, he said, "The fact that the Panmunjom Declaration's implementation could not be sped up was never for lack of determination. It was because we could not step beyond the international restrictions that are part of reality." There it is again, that inability to be an independent actor, and the compulsion to seek permission. Moon went on to say that "we should continue to find what is doable," [6] by which he meant any small thing that the United States would permit him to do.

In the same meeting, Moon stated that "in regard to connecting inter-Korean railroads, we will start with what is possible first." He added that he looks forward to working with the

DPRK to “attain a vision for reconnecting the Donghae and Gyeongui lines, as agreed upon by the two leaders” [of North and South Korea]. Since U.S. opposition had already dissuaded Moon from moving ahead on reconnecting the rail lines, all that’s left is for the two Koreas to work on agreeing on what that “vision” would look like without ever actually attempting to translate that vision into reality.

The United States and South Korea established a working group to coordinate the latter’s policy towards the DPRK. For the Trump administration, the group’s mission is to put the brakes on all attempts at cooperation with the north. It is widely thought in South Korea that it was the working group that prevented business representatives from checking on their factories at the closed Kaesong Industrial Complex. It was also the working group that refused to allow South Korea to ship 200,000 doses of Tamiflu last year to the DPRK. [7] No cracks can be permitted in the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign against the North Korea, not even when it comes to the provision of humanitarian aid.

With their only remaining hopes focused on closer cooperation with South Korea, the North Koreans have reached the point of total exasperation with Moon for his prioritizing the demands of U.S. imperialism over the needs of the Korean people.

From the North Korean perspective, Moon’s follow through on implementing the terms of the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula has been lacking. The clause that “affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord” should have been the overarching philosophy.

The Panmunjom Declaration’s call to “actively implement” economic projects agreed to in 2007 at the summit between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong Il had no chance, given punishing UN sanctions. Yet, there could have been some progress on implementing “practical steps towards the connection and modernization of the railways and roads on the eastern transportation corridor as well as between Seoul and Sinuiju for their utilization.” [8]

The immediate trigger for North Korea’s recent actions is the ongoing psychological warfare campaign waged by South Korean right-wing evangelical groups against the DPRK through the launch of propaganda balloons. The Panmunjom Declaration obligated both sides to cease all hostile acts against each other, including “distribution of leaflets” across the border. Given the frequency of right-wing balloon launches, the

DPRK felt that South Korea was lackadaisical at best in restraining such efforts. An unnamed former South Korean official comments: “What the North Koreans are saying is that if the South can’t even keep its promise to ban the propaganda balloons, a matter that’s unrelated to sanctions and that the leaders of South and North Korea already reached an agreement about, there isn’t anything the two sides can work on together.” [9] In a study published in 2014, based partly on interviews with defector groups, Jin-Heon Jung estimated the cost of a single balloon at around \$100. Given the volume of balloons sent aloft, it is clear that, as Jung puts it, “fundraising matters the most.” In addition to individual donations, Jung reports: “Some of my interlocutors told me that financial support from international organizations such as the Defense Forum Foundation and overseas churches account for a significant portion of the sponsorship.” [10]

Responding to North Korea’s complaints about South Korean inaction on inter-Korean relations, on June 15, Moon delivered a speech in which he expressed “frustration and regret” for not being able to talk about progress made since the South-North Joint Declaration of twenty years before. Demonstrating a gift for understatement, Moon went on to say: “We’ve always been using cautious approaches to take just one step forward – as if walking on ice – but now it seems that was insufficient.” [11]

A bit later in the speech, Moon explained: “The Korean Peninsula is not yet in a situation where both Koreas can charge ahead as much as we desire at our own discretion. We must move forward, though slowly, with the international community’s consent.” [12] Here, Moon used the term ‘international community’ in its standard usage, as referring solely to the few thousand people in the Washington Establishment, and excluding the rest of the world’s nearly eight billion people.

Moon followed with the suggestion “that there are projects where both Koreas can pursue independently,” and “we have to start with small, achievable tasks.” The problem is that the United States is never going to give its consent for any task, no matter how minor and unrelated to sanctions, and it is not in Moon’s character to even inch along without Washington’s approval.

The North Koreans find Moon’s inaction and penchant for expressing beautiful but empty words annoying. In a scathing reaction to Moon’s speech, Kim Yo Jong, First Vice Department Director of the Workers Party of Korea Central Committee, issued a statement that was filled with language that was undiplomatic, even quite harsh – but which was not inaccurate in its assessment of Moon. “As acknowledged by everyone, the

reason that the north-south agreements which were so wonderful did not see any light of even a single step of implementation was due to the noose of the pro-U.S. flunkeyism into which he put his neck.” Kim added that Moon accepted the U.S.-South Korea working group “under the coercion of his master and presented all issues related to the north-south ties to [the] White House. This has all boomeranged.” [13]

It is not only what Kim terms Moon’s “servile” attitude that perturbs the North Koreans. Even though joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises, which practice the bombing and invasion of the DPRK, have been downscaled, the North Koreans still regard these smaller exercises as a violation of the spirit of the Comprehensive Military Agreement signed between the two Koreas. [14]

The same can be said of South Korea’s military buildup. Spending on the military rose 7.4% this year, and Moon’s plans call for an average increase of 7.5% each year through 2023. Already, South Korea ranks tenth worldwide in defense spending, [15] and the nation is the fourth-largest buyer of U.S. weaponry. [16] In what strikes the DPRK as a provocative move, South Korea is allocating \$3.3 billion to purchase twenty additional F-35 stealth fighter jets over the next five years. [17]

The direction that inter-Korean relations take in the future depends primarily on whether Moon, master of the empty phrase, decides to add action to his repertoire and behave as if he regards South Korea as a sovereign nation. As a recent report in the North Korean press put it, the only option for improvement is “by joining hands with the fellow countrymen, not with foreign forces.” [18] The time has come for Moon to choose between serving the Korean people and serving Washington.

Cheong Seong-chang, director of the Center for North Korean Studies at South Korea’s Sejong Institute, observes, “It has been just words. For the North, the South Korean government’s words and actions are different...There is a need for actions to match words, and it is also necessary for actions to move ahead of words. At the least, the two need to move at the same pace.” [19]

Notes.

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