

## Art of the Korean deal

By Bunn Nagara



*Bargaining power: After multiple missile and nuclear bomb tests in recent years, Pyongyang believes it has perfected robust defence capabilities to the extent that major powers now have to negotiate with it.*

NO sooner had US and North Korean officials raced towards a first-ever summit than they competed to pull away from it. Is anyone in Washington and Pyongyang serious about a peace deal anymore?

After President Donald Trump and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un exchanged insults throughout 2017 over the latter's missile and nuclear arsenals, a thaw in inter-Korean relations began last February.

This led to real prospects of a first US-North Korean summit from March. Since they were the principals of the 1950-53 war that has yet to end formally, theirs would be the summit that matters most.

The talks would centre on the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula by ridding it of the North's nuclear weapons. The terms and conditions for that are crucial.

Then as everyone looked forward to the historic summit in Singapore on June 12, something untoward happened.

US National Security Advisor John Bolton, and then Vice-President Mike Pence, said North Korea could go the Libya route. By 2003 Muammar Gaddafi's Libya sought better relations with the US and offered to abandon its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programmes.

Without the threat from these weapons, the US and its allies attacked Libya and Gaddafi was murdered. It was a sobering lesson to all other countries in a similar position.

Ultra-hawk Bolton, champion of the US invasion of Iraq, had advocated the bombing of North Korea. His comment on the Libyan experience for Pyongyang prompted a rebuke followed by a summit recalibration in mid-May.

North Korea then declared it would not surrender its nuclear weapons even for economic aid. US officials wondered what could have changed North Korea's attitude.

As South Korea frantically tried to place the summit back on track, the US and North Korea became cool to the prospect. Amid the uncertainty, Trump accused Pyongyang of hostility and last Thursday cancelled the summit.

Enter the pundits speculating over how the summit was really improbable from the start.

First it was said that both sides could not agree on what should be “on the table” and “what should not.”

It was then said that the US and North Korea were not in agreement on the precise meaning of “complete denuclearisation.”

It was also said that there was no agreement on the necessary terms and conditions required: the steps needed from each side or the sequence of their occurrence.

It was further said that verification was a difficult and even unresolvable issue. How could anyone be certain that North Korea would fully comply with any agreement?

Equally, North Korea cannot be sure that the US would fulfil its end of the bargain, especially after it had just dumped the nuclear deal with Iran.

The reality on the ground however is that these issues are supposed to be the content of the summit negotiations, not stumbling blocks to holding the summit.

The day after Trump “cancelled” the summit he said it could be back on – without any delay. North Korea remained open to it, having shown goodwill by destroying nuclear testing tunnels on Thursday.

Both Trump and Kim are keen on the summit but want to avoid seeming too anxious. The sense is that the one who appears too keen may be signalling weakness.

In the world of first-ever summits, notably this one, a key factor is ego – or “face”. Meanwhile both leaders have to overcome the contrarian tendencies of their hawkish advisers.

The conventional view is that Kim is the irrational and unpredictable party. In practice he and Trump are fairly well matched in unpredictability.

North Korean leaders, autocratic as they are, have been quite rational if their interests are understood.

For Kim as it was for his father and grandfather before, the main priority is national security with a credible defence. Pyongyang cannot simply switch off its preparatory war mode in the absence of a peace treaty.

Its other major state interest is national sovereignty. With the perpetual war footing, albeit with a decades-long cessation of hostilities, North Korea still fears destabilisation by South Korea or the US.

Another key state interest is national integrity. In relation to its powerful neighbours this means not being used by China or Russia, while trying to get what it needs from them.

Much has been said about North Korea’s newer generation of missiles and nuclear warheads. However, little has been asked seriously about what it needs them for.

In practice they cannot be for initiating any war in which North Korea is certain to lose most devastatingly. It would be decimated in a nuclear exchange with the US, or in attacking a US ally like South Korea or Japan that would lead to the same thing.

Neither can they be a ticket to becoming a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. Nor can they be a worthwhile means for boosting North Korea’s international prestige or even its national self-esteem.

However, nuclear weapons are seen as a means for deterring foreign invasion even with conventional arms – the same rationale used by virtually all other countries from major Western states to developing nations in the Third World.

That explains why the US failed to convince Kim that his country would be safer if he would only abandon his nuclear weapons first. The fall of Iraq and Libya serves as a stark and powerful reminder.

North Korea’s real concerns focus on a possible US attack, with or without South Korean assistance. Since the war has not officially ended, a Trump-Bolton bombing campaign is still not inconceivable.

Pyongyang’s interest thus lies in a formal peace treaty with firm and assured security guarantees. That should also be an interest shared internationally.

To fulfil both these objectives, a summit with the US is seen as a meaningful first step. This explains the summit’s importance to North Korea and Pyongyang’s willingness to ignore provocations along the way.

The standard international narrative sees North Korea buckling under international sanctions and pressure from China, thereby producing an agreement to denuclearise.

It then sees the promise of economic assistance to a vanquished North Korea as a soothing balm in ending the solitude of the “Hermit Kingdom.”

This narrative concludes with a rebooted US-led North-East Asia, as US allies South Korea and Japan are reassured, all having done so from a position of strength and enduring righteousness.

A problem with this narrative is that it does not apply to North Korea.

Pyongyang’s parallel narrative is that, after multiple missile and nuclear bomb tests in recent years, it has perfected robust defence capabilities to the extent that major powers now have to negotiate with it.

Consequently the international community now has to enact a formal peace treaty with Pyongyang, which has triumphed from a position of strength without succumbing to pressure.

All this is further proof of its righteous and resolute leadership, whose legitimate longing for peace with national development has finally been achieved.

Whichever narrative one prefers, understanding that there are alternative narratives – and letting them be – are important steps on the way to enduring peace.

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