



DPRK: game, reset and match?

by Ramon Pacheco Pardo

The security situation in the Korean Peninsula has markedly deteriorated over the past few months. North Korea's regular missile launches, development of ICBM capabilities, and persistent threat of new nuclear tests show the need for a rethink about how to deal with the Kim Jong-un regime. Muscular approaches including sanctions, military exercises in the Korean Peninsula, and the threat of surgical strikes on North Korea have not worked so far. Applying further pressure on Pyongyang might even backfire, since it plays to the Kim regime's narrative that it needs to strengthen its nuclear and missile deterrence capabilities. Indeed, Kim Jong-un has significantly increased the frequency of WMD tests compared to his father Kim Jong-il. This signals that he will not cave in under a new round of sanctions or further US bomber flights over the Korean Peninsula.

Relaunching dialogue to deal with North Korea's WMD programmes might work better. This seems to be the view held by newly-elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Dialogue was the most cited word in his recent Berlin speech, in which he laid out his administration's policy towards North Korea. The new Korean government, however, talks about 'conditional dialogue'. Furthermore, its North Korea policy includes a mixture of other carrots – such as economic cooperation – and sticks – including the continuation of sanctions. In other words, President Moon's policy does not seek talks for the sake of talks. There is also an acknowledgement that the geopolitical situation in the Korean

Peninsula requires consideration of the views of major stakeholders.

Moon's reset

President Moon and, indeed, many Koreans want South Korea to lead inter-Korean relations and dialogue. They feel that Seoul has sometimes been sidelined in the past. Over the past few months, in particular, there has been concern in Seoul that President Donald Trump seems to have been taking decisions on Korean Peninsula matters in consultation with Beijing and Tokyo only. The power vacuum in the Blue House throughout former President Park Geun-hye's impeachment process was seen as hugely damaging in this respect. President Moon has made clear that Seoul will seek to drive inter-Korean relations and peace in the Peninsula. This matters, for it means that his administration is determined to pursue a bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang.

'Conditional dialogue' is the key component of Seoul's approach towards North Korea. The conditions, however, are soft. During his recent trip to Washington, President Moon stated that a missile and nuclear test moratorium and a promise to stop these programmes are sufficient for bilateral talks to take place. A commitment to denuclearisation is not a pre-condition. Furthermore, talks can initially focus on issues such as inter-Korean family reunions or economic engagement, with discussions about North Korea's WMD programmes kicking in

only later. Critically, the Blue House does not see inter-Korean dialogue as contingent on US acquiescence. Nonetheless, President Moon suggested that Washington supports inter-Korean dialogue during his Berlin speech. Other powers such as China and the EU have also expressed their backing for this dialogue in the past.

Another important aspect of Seoul's approach towards Pyongyang suggesting re-engagement involves renewed calls for a multilateral dialogue to deal with Kim's regime. President Moon mentioned this possibility during his inauguration and Berlin speeches, underscoring its importance. In theory, resumption of a multilateral dialogue should be possible. President Trump has stated that he is open to talks under the right conditions. Crucially, a clear commitment to denuclearisation is not a precondition in the way that it seemed to be for former President Barack Obama. This would remove an important barrier to dialogue. And multilateral talks have the support of other powers. China and Russia have been calling for resumption of the Six-Party Talks since they were discontinued in 2009. The EU's 'critical engagement' policy also includes a dialogue component.

President Moon also wants economic engagement to be at the centre of his administration's approach towards its northern neighbour. In his recent Washington trip, he mentioned the possibility of resuming the operation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and tourism in the Mount Kumgang region. These are highly symbolic projects for South Koreans supportive of inter-Korean engagement. President Moon then announced his intention to draw 'a new economic map for the Korean Peninsula' during his Berlin speech. This would include a rail connection from Busan to Europe and other infrastructure projects involving North Korea that previous South Korean governments had also considered. Economic engagement might entail working around existing UN sanctions on Pyongyang. Nonetheless, China and Russia have continued to develop infrastructure projects in North Korea even as South Korea interrupted its own; the EU has not ceased to provide humanitarian and other assistance; and dozens of countries maintain economic relations with North Korea.

Will it work?

President Moon's plans to reset inter-Korean relations and prioritise dialogue and engagement look both reasonable and feasible. The question is whether this approach will work. Different stakeholders have different priorities, which has been the main reason behind the failure of previous dialogues

with Pyongyang. Most notably, denuclearisation of North Korea continues to be Washington's main goal. Complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation has been US policy since the George W. Bush administration took office. President Moon acknowledged this goal in Berlin. By contrast, Pyongyang has repeatedly stated that it now is a nuclear power and should be treated as such: there is no indication, in other words, that it is willing to negotiate the dismantlement of its nuclear programme, seen as the ultimate deterrent against a US attack. President Moon has called for a peace agreement in the Korean Peninsula to ease North Korea's concerns. However, the fate of Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein has been cited by the Kim regime as the driver behind its nuclear deterrent.

Economic engagement might have a better chance of success. The thinking among many South Koreans, including President Moon, is that economic exchanges with North Korea will lead to its opening up and reform. Once the government feels reassured that economic reform will not result in regime change, it should be willing to increase exchanges with the outside world and ease the repression of ordinary North Koreans. Pyongyang would thus follow in the footsteps of China, Vietnam or, more recently, Burma/Myanmar. Even though it might seem unlikely that the Kim regime would open up, the truth is that North Korea has already been implementing stop-and-go economic reforms since July 2002. Markets and the private sector are central to the livelihood of many North Koreans – something that the regime is aware of and has even encouraged.

When everything else fails

Ultimately, engagement seems the only realistic option to deal with Pyongyang. There is no indication of an upcoming internal revolt against the regime. Any attack on North Korea would result in retaliation and thousands of deaths. President Moon is betting that the conditions are ripe for the main stakeholders to give bilateral and multilateral dialogues and inter-Korean economic exchanges a fair try. He is building on a popular line of thought among liberal South Koreans that engagement is the best means of encouraging reform from within, which in turn is the only way to make progress towards North Korea's denuclearisation and eventual peace in the Korean Peninsula.

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