

Trump, Kim, and an Uncanny Diplomatic Opening

BRUCE CUMINGS

After he swept into office with no foreign policy experience, riding a swell of opposition to free trade, internationalism, and the rules of the global game in place since 1945, Donald Trump's first year and a half in office have confirmed him to be an American nationalist of the first order. His protectionism and his appeals to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment put him right in line with prominent isolationists of the 1930s.

All of this is now a staple of cable news. Less appreciated is Trump's apparent willingness to undermine or dismantle the fundamental security strategy of the United States in the postwar era. He is not merely opposing free trade, internationalism, and Atlanticism, but challenging the archipelago of empire structured by more than 900 military bases around the world as some kind of expensive, long-obsolescent gift to American allies. This archipelago includes tens of thousands of US troops on the territory of most of our economic competitors—Britain, Germany, Japan, and South Korea, among others—which keeps them dependent for their security and exercises a subtle, light hold on their jugular.

This is an unprecedented system, whereby the world's leading power utilizes a so-called external state to maintain order among the lesser great powers, the exceptions of course being China, Russia, and France. (Charles de Gaulle told Lyndon Johnson to take American troops home in 1967 because France wanted its independence back.) Nothing like this system existed before World War II; it is inconceivable, say, that Britain would have had troops on the territory of France or Germany in peacetime. This is a global reality that is hardly ever talked about, hidden in plain sight. But since 1945 it has completely neutered the operation of realpolitik and “balancing” among the Western European countries and Japan. Emerging in the

late 1940s from the strategic vision of the US diplomat George Kennan, it is a structure for containing enemies and constraining allies. Donald Trump does not get it.

During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump complained that “we defend everybody,” often free of charge—an absurd claim. He vowed that “we will not be ripped off anymore” and he threatened to withdraw “American protection” from Japan and South Korea, including the nuclear umbrella—why not let them defend themselves against North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles? Trump said he would renegotiate security pacts with Japan, South Korea, and NATO allies, unless they start “paying their way” (in fact, South Korea contributes about 55 percent of the cost of maintaining American troops on its soil). This was not merely campaign rhetoric: he has continued airing the same complaints as president.

COLLISION COURSE

Americans tend to be ill-informed about the history of our involvement with Korea and Japan going back to World War II. Every mini-crisis with the North is treated as *sui generis*, accompanied by the refrain that Pyongyang has a history of violating one agreement after another.

However, Bill Clinton reached a deal that froze North Korea's plutonium production for eight years (1994–2002). In October 2000, North Korean Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok visited Washington; he and Clinton signed a statement pledging that neither country would henceforth bear “hostile intent” toward the other. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang later that month as the two sides worked toward a deal to eliminate the North's medium- and long-range missiles.

But George W. Bush's administration discarded both agreements; under the influence of State Department official John Bolton (recently resurrected as Trump's national security adviser), it ended the 1994 freeze. Pyongyang would have no nuclear

BRUCE CUMINGS is a professor of history at the University of Chicago and a Current History contributing editor.

weapons if Clinton's agreements had been honored. But Bush didn't stop there—he ratcheted up tensions by placing North Korea in his “axis of evil” and, in September 2002, announced his doctrine of preemptive war.

The beginning of Trump's presidency coincided with a bipartisan consensus that all previous agreements to constrain the North's nuclear program had failed, and so the time may have come to use force—whether to take out its missiles, or to topple the regime. In September 2016, the Council on Foreign Relations had issued a report urging that “more assertive military and political actions” should be considered, including ones that “directly threaten the existence of the regime.”

Meanwhile, Pyongyang was racing to develop its weapons. Just three weeks after his inauguration, Trump was having an al fresco dinner at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when a message arrived in the middle of the meal. Pyongyang had tested a new solid-fuel missile, fired from a hard-to-detect mobile launcher. The timing suggested it was intended as a personal greeting for Trump and Abe.

In the summer of 2017, tensions reached a fever pitch when Trump promised “fire and fury that the world has never seen” if Pyongyang continued to threaten the United States. In his September 2017 address to the United Nations, he threatened “to totally destroy” North Korea.

The scholar and former US official Victor Cha suggested that he withdrew as a potential nominee for the post of US ambassador to Seoul in December 2017 because Trump and his advisers were discussing ways to give North Korea a “bloody nose,” a preemptive strike presumably short of all-out war. In a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, Cha said, “Force will be necessary to deal with a North Korea if it attacks first, but not through a preventive strike that could start a nuclear war.” North Korea has the fourth-largest army in the world as well as nuclear weapons, one of which it successfully tested in September 2017.

UNLIKELY PEACEMAKERS

When the year 2018 dawned, all this talk of war dissipated overnight. Kim Jong-un gave an unusually conciliatory New Year's address. South Korean President Moon Jae-in hosted a North Korean

team at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, where Kim's sister, Kim Yo-jong, and Kim Yong-chol, a former intelligence chief, impressed almost everybody (except US Vice President Mike Pence, who studiously ignored them) with their poise and warm interactions with Moon.

Along came summits between the two Korean leaders, a real thaw in Sino–North Korean relations as Kim made his first visit to Beijing (and then two others in succeeding weeks), and lo and behold, Kim's summit with Trump in Singapore on June 12, a global media spectacle like no other. Out of that meeting came a vague commitment to denuclearization, and an equally vague pledge to fashion a new peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Today it isn't clear whether this was a diplomatic breakthrough or a burlesque show.

Trump still speaks highly of Kim Jong-un and their summit. Meanwhile, various pundits and think tanks say that North Korea has dismantled some nuclear and missile sites while continuing to work assiduously at others. The Trump admin-

istration's position remains the same as Barack Obama's: it's up to the North to get rid of its nukes and missiles before Washington will consider relaxing sanctions or improving relations with the Pyongyang regime. This has

always been utterly unrealistic. These weapons are the only bargaining chips North Korea has that carry any weight; why would they give them up in return for promises that may or may not be consummated?

North Korea's position is the same one it has always held: denuclearization will only occur in a tit-for-tat marathon negotiation, like the one in the 1990s that eventually had all of the North's plutonium under control and its missiles nearly mothballed in 2000. The paradox is that North Korea is well aware of every step that led to this success, while American policy makers on a bipartisan basis deny that there was any progress at all, insisting that North Korea cheats on any and all of its agreements with the United States. This particular impasse shows no signs of resolution.

The saving grace is that Moon Jae-in is clearly the savviest South Korean leader in the nation's history, and determined to keep engagement with the North on track. His hand guided much of the diplomacy in the first months of this year; a decade ago, he also was the architect of the second-ever sum-

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mit meeting between the leaders of the two Koreas (at that time they were Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il), in October 2007. That summit is mostly forgotten, yet it resulted in a remarkable agreement to open up much of the southwestern part of North Korea to trade—with new export zones at Haeju and Namp’o, and an expansion of the then-flourishing free economic zone in the ancient capital of Kaesong, just above the Demilitarized Zone. But the right-winger Lee Myung-bak was elected as Roh’s successor two months later, and proceeded to act as if nothing noteworthy occurred at the 2007 summit. He and his successor Park Geun-hye (by now impeached and in jail) pursued hard-line policies that got exactly nowhere.

Today Moon sees an economic opening to North Korea as the core of his engagement policies. He wants to help bring the North Korean economy out of isolation, bit by bit, and bring in South Korean firms to incrementally rebuild the North’s infrastructure. If the Trump administration turns back toward a hard-line policy, it will have to reckon with a very determined and committed South Korean leader.

Signs of strain between Seoul and Washington—which always seem to appear when a progressive president in the Blue House encounters a Republican in the White House—cropped up in late July, when both Pyongyang and Seoul called for a declaration to terminate the Korean War armistice (a step toward formally ending the war), timed for the 65th anniversary of the end of hostilities on July 27. Washington did nothing. Still, the North used the occasion to return the remains of 55 Americans killed during the war, a positive sign that Pyongyang remains committed to pursuing diplomacy with Washington.

Liberal critics of Trump have been scathing about the Singapore summit. For example, Jessica T. Mathews, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, says Trump, “without getting anything from North Korea,” nonetheless just “gave and gave.” But this misses the reality that apart from the prestige granted to Kim as the first North Korean leader to meet a sitting American president, it is Pyongyang that, so far, has gotten very little. Trump suspended an upcoming military exercise with the South. Meanwhile, the North has kept a moratorium on A-bomb and missile testing since last November, returned three American captives, handed over the remains of US soldiers, destroyed a missile-engine testing site, and muted its usual drumbeat of anti-American rhetoric. Without comparable concessions on the American side, this diplomatic dance is doomed to end—and badly, because Trump seems to see no alternative but the use of force should diplomacy fail.

At this writing, however, let’s call the summit a major breakthrough. It was Jimmy Carter’s intervention in June 1994, when the former president met directly with Kim Il-sung in Pyongyang, that set in motion the diplomacy that led to the plutonium freeze. In their system the maximum leader decides everything, and now we have a president who operates in the same way, resisting his advisers’ best efforts to throw a saddle on him. So it’s smart to negotiate this fraught conflict at the highest level. It is anybody’s guess what the future holds for Korean-American relations, but we can say that sometimes, as Hegel observed, the cunning of history presents us with a stunningly unexpected and uncanny tableau unfolding before our very eyes. For the time being—in the first eight months of this year—it has been all to the good. ■