

Global Security Briefing – September 2018

North Korea and The United States – Who is in Charge?

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Summary

Donald Trump seems certain that North Korea is on the path to “denuclearisation” thanks to his personal rapport with Kim Jong-Un and the United States’ “maximum pressure” campaign to isolate and intimidate North Korea. More likely, the North is consolidating its nuclear capabilities while successfully re-engaging economically with the South, China and others. This briefing explores how further peaceful progress in North East Asia may depend on furthering Trump’s delusion that he is leading and winning with Pyongyang.

Introduction

As his 25 September address to the UN General Assembly highlighted, President Donald Trump continues to hail his Singapore summit meeting with Kim Jong-Un as a success, with US-North Korea relations in marked contrast to the increasing tensions between Washington and Tehran. This briefing examines recent developments that suggest that the focus of North Korean policy has moved towards maintaining its nuclear capability, without any meaningful attempt to address Trump’s concerns, while reviving its economy by greatly improving relations with South Korea and benefitting from an anticipated easing of sanctions. Whether or not Trump recognises this dynamic will heavily influence its impact on US-North Korean relations in the coming months.

The Changing Relationship

Eighteen months ago, and three months after Donald Trump was inaugurated as President, it had already become clear that his approach to foreign relations was more personal, more aggressive and more reliant on military power than diplomacy. As the April 2017 briefing in this series, [Trump, North Korea and the Risk of War](#), discussed, his intention to “make America great again” was reflected in planned increases in military budgets combined with an insistence that President Barack Obama’s approach to international relations had been far too weak and defeatist.

This change of stance was powerfully reflected in his strong warning to North Korea that its nuclear weapon and long-range missile development programmes were entirely unacceptable to the United States. He made it utterly clear that the United States was simply not prepared to allow North Korea to develop a nuclear posture that would allow it to produce intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could deliver thermonuclear weapons to continental US cities. This was in the context of indications that North Korea had made considerable progress with both programmes, with every chance of being in just such a position before the end of Mr Trump’s first term in office.

This state of tension persisted for nearly a year, with bombastic rhetoric a marked feature of the Trump/Kim relationship, but by early this year Kim Jong-Un was making some significant moves towards South Korea while limiting the observable elements of North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. This followed the late November test launch of an ICBM that seemed to confirm the North's ability to deliver a warhead almost anywhere in the continental United States.

Kim was aided in these overtures by a receptive government in Seoul, and by the lucky coincidence of South Korea hosting the 2018 Winter Olympics in February. The late participation of North Korea in those games was largely welcomed by the South Korean electorate and was followed on 12 June by a much-heralded summit meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-Un in Singapore. President Trump hailed that as a great success for his "maximum pressure" approach, but independent analysts were far more cautious, a view reflected in this series' June briefing, [The Kim/Trump Summit and Implications for Iran](#). While focused primarily on US/Iranian relations, the briefing commented:

President Trump viewed the summit as proof positive of his abilities as a deal-maker, with his more committed supporters seeing it as worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize. Indeed, his own post-summit communications showed that he thought that his allies were not prepared sufficiently to recognise his achievement.

A more detached analysis suggests that the primary beneficiary was actually Kim Jong-Un. In the space of just four months he succeeded in stimulating a rapprochement with South Korea through the Winter Olympics, made two visits to the South to meet President Moon Jae-In, and then followed this with a face-to-face meeting with Trump. He combined this with two visits to the Chinese leadership and high-level contacts with Russia, the latter likely to include a direct meeting with President Putin later this year.

While he agreed to progressive denuclearisation, no timescale was set and the very success of the summit and his global engagement meant that it was highly unlikely that sanctions against the country would be maintained at the current high level. Above all, he was able to present a small and highly isolated autocracy as a major player on the world stage and, in diplomatic terms at least, an equal of the United States.

Three months later, President Trump still takes the view that the summit was a great success and that his policy of threat and cajole is the appropriate way forward, with him now focused on Iran as the great threat to US interests, allies and the wider world. The reality as far as US relations with North Korea are concerned may be rather different and tend to support the analysis outlined above, not least because his post-summit declaration that North Korea was no longer a nuclear threat has meant that Russia and China are both resuming normal trading relations with North Korea.

The North Korean Nuclear stance

Since the Singapore summit meeting North Korea has continued to pursue a policy of limiting observable developments in its nuclear and missile capabilities, but there are strong indications that this does not amount to clear progress towards denuclearisation,

with evidence available in the public domain indicating that both programmes are continuing.

A complication is that there is not an agreed definition between the parties of what “denuclearisation” means. For the Trump administration it means North Korea giving up its current programme, including its small nuclear stockpile, and also dismantling any capability that could be used to regenerate a programme. For North Korea it would appear to mean the withdrawal of any US nuclear capability in the region, and quite possibly the withdrawal of virtually all US forces from South Korea, probably Okinawa and perhaps even the main islands of Japan.

One of the key requirements of the United States at the time of the summit was that North Korea provide an inventory of its nuclear production capabilities and weapons and that this would be followed up with progress on the independently verifiable destruction of facilities. This was made clear by Trump’s Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in his speech to the Heritage Foundation in Washington on 21 May. No such inventories have been provided nor do they look likely at present, and while some dismantling of nuclear and missile test sites has been observed remotely or by journalists, none has been subject to rigorous, verifiable onsite inspection. Instead, the focus from the Kim regime has been on a formal end to the Korean War, still subject only to the Armistice agreed on 27 July 1953, whereas the Trump administration requires progress on denuclearisation first.

One perceptive [analysis](#), probably shared by some of Trump’s international security advisors, is that North Korea is adopting the Pakistan approach whereby Islamabad resisted attempts to cease nuclear developments after its first test in 1998, partly by continuing the programme with minimal publicity. India takes a similar, if less low-profile line. Israel, too, has long had a policy of not confirming its nuclear capabilities, even though it had a limited nuclear force by the end of the 1960s and is now almost certainly a substantial nuclear power. Each of these states, while clearly acting in breach of international norms on weapons development, has successfully normalised its position as a de facto nuclear power.

The North/South Relationship

On its own, North Korea may be able to sustain this approach for many months and possibly longer, depending on the status of sanctions and the attitude of the South Korean government. However, it clearly wants to make progress in other directions to consolidate its position for the longer term, the recent summit meeting with South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in being part of this process. The three-day meeting that started in Pyongyang on 17 September included one unique event - President Moon addressing a huge crowd of 150,000 North Koreans at the Mass Games. It also resulted in agreement on a number of issues including increased cultural exchanges, more re-uniting of families and improved economic relations.

One of the most significant of the economic developments was the possible re-opening of the [Kaesong Industrial Complex](#) and in some ways the future of this complex will be a significant indicator of longer-term trends in North-South relations. It is located just north of the demilitarised zone but was established largely by South Korean business interests in 2004 as a joint operation with North Korea providing the labour for South Korean industries. It was a substantial endeavour and at its peak it employed 54,000 North Koreans and hundreds of South Koreans, but the South Korean government withdrew in February 2016 after rising tensions, including North Korean missile tests.

Just before the Singapore summit it was reported that a joint liaison office would be established at Kaesong to look into reopening the Complex and it has since been reported that during the period of closure the North Koreans did not appear to have sequestered any of the equipment. Furthermore, while there had been some weather and related damage it would probably not be an excessively expensive process to re-open the whole complex.

In South Korea, re-unification is still sought by older generations but is of diminishing concern for younger Koreans. The difficult and hugely expensive experience of re-unification in Germany is a further argument against any rapid move in this direction. President Moon will be keen that the North pursues some form of economic catch-up or convergence with the South rather than collapsing into destitution. What is certainly wanted is a marked decrease in tensions, a diminishing of North Korea's military forces and mutually beneficial economic cooperation with Kaesong the lead example of this.

In yet another move, former channels of communication including special fax and phone lines which had been subject to disruption at times of tension will be re-established to ensure more secure round-the-clock availability. Kim Jong-Un has separately invited President Trump to meet at another summit later this year, possibly as early as October, while Kim is expected to visit South Korea in November or December.

Conclusion

The strong indication now is that the North Korean regime has three major aims, on two of which it is already making some progress. The first is its determination to maintain a basic nuclear capability, largely because of fear of attack, and it will only give this up in the event of an absolute certainty that such a threat no longer exists. Given the firm rule of the country by the Kim dynasty and the rigorous and often brutal control of dissent, that means that the second aim, good relations with South Korea, will be enhanced, but only with considerable caution.

The third aim is to concentrate North Korean domestic and foreign policy on rapid economic development, the pre-requisite for this being an easing of international sanctions as well as improved relations with South Korea. It is unlikely that North Korea has its sights on a re-unification with the South that amounts to a takeover, even though some analysts have claimed that this is its long-term motivation to acquire nuclear capability. It is more likely that the regime wants to prioritise economic development to

put it in a stronger position in relation to the South and also to minimise the risk of internal dissent.

More immediately, though, progress depends very largely on the United States and even the personality and character of Mr Trump. As long as he remains positive and does not come to the view that it is Pyongyang and not Washington that is driving the agenda, then progress is possible, but given his nature that is far from certain.

What is clear is that there is currently far less tension and risk of war in East Asia than at the beginning of the year, and that is greatly to be welcomed. It is also clear that it is Kim Jong-Un who is so far taking the lead on this, and that President Trump is fortunately unable to see this. Whether circumstances improve further depends very much on whether that remains the case.

About the Author

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