



A WAY OUT OF THE NORTH KOREAN LABYRINTH

By Stephen Blank

Abstract

The sudden announcement of a North Korea-U.S. summit in March 2018 upended all previous diplomacy concerning North Korea's nuclear program. In return for a bilateral presidential summit, Pyongyang has agreed to suspend testing of its nuclear and missile programs and accepted the continuation of scheduled U.S.-South Korea exercises as planned. While this unexpected development reduces tensions and opens up a political path to a solution on the Korean Peninsula, it also imparts increased urgency for a well-conceived U.S. diplomatic strategy so that the summit and any ensuing negotiations lead to positive outcomes for Washington and Seoul and the other interested parties, thus ensuring its sustainability. In this context, the author advances an assessment of the current situation and a proposal for a U.S. program that could reduce military tensions in and around Korea, lead to the stabilization of a new and legitimate equilibrium in Northeast Asia, and advance shared American, South Korean, and Japanese objectives.

Key Words: *Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, United States, Denuclearization, China*

Introduction

By February 2018 many members of the Trump administration were entertaining the idea of a "limited strike" on North Korea. Supposedly by giving Pyongyang a "bloody nose" – against which it would not retaliate – it would be convinced that Washington meant business and would accept negotiations to denuclearize in return for unspecified agreements.¹ These fantastic and dangerous (not to say reckless) ideas were clearly the result of frustration as reported by the press.² Yet, at the same time, the administration was also coming around to the idea of

supporting the impending inter-Korean negotiations and South Korea's participation in them even though those talks were a direct result of a North Korean initiative.³ Vice President Pence indicated a willingness to talk directly with North Korea even though the administration formally insisted that North Korea pledge denuclearization as a precondition to any negotiated way out of the crisis.

Although the surprise announcement of the U.S.-North Korea summit in May perhaps indicates the diplomatic option is winning the day, it is still difficult to determine whether there is a coherent North Korea policy emanating from the White House due to a number of contradictory statements in the recent past. The frustration behind the administration's statements and postures is real and well-deserved: U.S. policy has hitherto utterly failed in its generation-long mission to prevent North Korea from becoming a de facto nuclear power and the incoherence that bedevils the Trump administration's efforts to date is rooted in a similar bipartisan denial of reality in previous administrations. Yet, for every statement that the U.S. is ready to negotiate with North Korea, even without preconditions, there are others refusing to commit to a peaceful solution, disparaging diplomacy as a waste of time, entertaining fantasies of limited military strikes on North Korea, claiming that North Korean nuclear weapons are intolerable to the world, and arguing that time is running out, as well as a host of deployments as a show of force.⁴ Likewise, the White House has repeatedly claimed that North Korea and its leader cannot be deterred, or that the regime will collapse if pushed hard enough, or that Kim Jong-un is crazy, as if evil and insanity were the same thing. There is no evidence for any of these arguments or at least none that has been offered to Congress or the public.

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Further adding to the problem are complications from a lack of clear, mutual understanding of terms between Washington and Pyongyang. While Kim Jong-un may have expressed his willingness to denuclearize in exchange for a security guarantee in his proposal for a U.S.-North Korea summit, this has previously meant the termination of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and removal of South Korea from the U.S. nuclear umbrella.⁵ Washington's idea of denuclearization, the complete and verifiable dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program, is an equally deluded and illusory idea since nobody negotiates away their survival, particularly if it is what they believe to be their basis for both domestic and external survival.⁶ U.S. policymakers in both parties seem congenitally incapable of framing the North Korea problem in ways that would help get out of the current impasse.⁷ But with the impending May summit rapidly approaching, the necessity of formulating and implementing a truly coherent policy that takes account of all the dimensions of this problem becomes increasingly urgent.

The inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea summits will be the result of North Korea's initiative, not anyone else's. Therefore, the reconceptualization of the North Korean nuclearization question and its ramifications should begin with these negotiations. In this context, it is very encouraging that South Korean President Moon Jae-in has tied progress in inter-Korean talks to the outcome of U.S.-DPRK discussions over North Korea's nuclear program.⁸ In other words, no summit will take place between the two Koreas unless there is progress on denuclearization of the North. The suspension of nuclear and missile tests declared at the meeting in Pyongyang between Kim Jong-un and high level South Korean officials can be seen as part of that process.

As it appears that these talks may lead to the start of negotiations, it is essential that Washington has a defined agenda and set of proposals so that it can direct the negotiations rather than leave North Korea, China, or Russia to play the key initiating and mediating roles. If any of those powers can wrest the leadership role in the negotiating process away from the others the results will not be beneficial to the U.S. or its allies. Equally important, any American proposals and agendas must be carefully coordinated in advance with Tokyo and Seoul to have any chance of success.

The success of diplomacy with North Korea is now crucial to the future of Northeast Asia. If diplomatic negotiations are excluded a priori, then war is the only alternative, which is why news of the U.S.-North Korea summit was universally welcomed. As

Max Boot wrote, "If deterrence is unacceptable and sanctions are unsuccessful, that leaves only one way to stop the North Korean nuclear program — through military action."⁹ War entails probably close to a million if not more casualties, will probably lead quickly to nuclear use, and may well destroy the entire Korean Peninsula. If, as Liddell Hart wrote, the purpose of war is a better peace, this outcome hardly justifies war. It should be clear, though apparently it isn't, that any war against North Korea, regardless of who starts it, will inevitably escalate into a total war. Pyongyang cannot afford to lose any war and the U.S. cannot count on it to recognize that it only has "limited interests" and would only be inflicting "limited strikes." Any such attack will quickly escalate since possessing nuclear weapons justifies the suffering imposed by the regime upon its people and must be used should its power be jeopardized. Thus, talk of limited strikes or limited war represents a flight from reality.

Moreover, by all accounts the DPRK's nuclear and missile capabilities are increasing even if we cannot be sure by how much. As the ex-intelligence analyst Sue Mi Terry observed, the U.S.' repeated mistakes in assessing North Korean capabilities have all been an underestimation of those capabilities.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that the illusions that have underpinned the bipartisan failure to deal with North Korea have led us to this impasse. It would be wise to stop repeating failed policies and find an alternative. Washington must change the losing game it is playing and reconceptualize the Korean crisis and the challenges and opportunities it presents to restructure the "game" in Northeast Asia and exit from the labyrinth where it is now.

To do so means dispensing with past illusions that have led to this dead end and rethink the entire regional security situation. Only after exposing and questioning those illusions can the U.S. begin to think anew about Korea and potential escapes from the dead end in which it is now trapped. To start, this means viewing North Korean nuclearization not solely or even primarily as a proliferation problem (although it certainly is that), but first as a challenge to regional security in Northeast Asia and only secondly as a proliferation problem even taking into account North Korea's long-standing support for proliferators abroad and their support for it.¹¹ This will highlight that while Pyongyang's nuclear program coercively challenges the status quo and U.S. allies, it also offers hidden opportunities, even if they are difficult to realize, for restructuring Northeast Asian security to the benefit of the U.S. and against the U.S.' main challenger, China.



The Illusions of U.S. Policy

For a generation, policymakers have entertained the illusion that by an act of will and threats of force the U.S. could persuade North Korea to stop its nuclear program and actually negotiate it away without prior specification of the quid pro quo for doing so. Given the record of U.S. policy since 1992 and the nature of the North Korean state throughout this period, this ranks as an amazing illusion. No state willingly renounces the means of its survival in advance of a negotiation unless it is already defeated and North Korea has not been defeated. The cost of war upon it has been seen as prohibitive throughout this period. In a time when U.S. power is universally acknowledged to have declined relative to China and Russia due to its parallel yet unavailing efforts to impose its will in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq, maintaining this illusion represents an unfathomable refusal to face realities.

Neither is this the only illusion afflicting U.S. policies. Washington may be out of time to prevent North Korea's nuclearization, but everyone has long known that the U.S. could not do that without launching another Korean war. However, time is hardly running out for a political resolution, unless North Korea is about to attack South Korea and believes that its nuclear weapons will deter the U.S. from defending South Korea or believes that it can simply intimidate South Korea into surrender by the threat of destruction.¹² If there is evidence to that effect nobody has heard or seen it. Instead, North Korea seized the opportunity of the Olympics to open negotiations and even propose separate summits with South Korea and the United States, thus triggering the latest effort at a negotiating initiative.

Similarly, insisting that Kim Jong-un is crazy and cannot be deterred falls before 65 years of prudential North Korean statecraft that demonstrates the regime's understanding of the limits it cannot cross. Furthermore, as Victor Cha observed,

If we believe that Kim is undeterrable without such a strike, how can we also believe that a strike will deter him from responding in kind? And if Kim is unpredictable, impulsive and bordering on irrational, how can we control the escalation ladder, which is premised on an adversary's rational understanding of signals and deterrence?¹³

Moreover, Chinese sources have long publicly and privately stated that if the U.S. invaded North Korea, China would meet them there, making such a "limited strike" an invitation to a large-scale war against China too.¹⁴

Finally, for too long the U.S. has also chased the illusion that it could induce Russia or China to pull its chestnuts out of the fire for its benefit. Yet, over a decade of their policies show that they blame Washington more than Pyongyang for this crisis and regard North Korea as an asset to their policy of reducing U.S. power and presence in Asia. They may oppose nuclearization because it allows North Korea to escape their control and conduct an independent policy that could trigger a war. But, they have covertly and sometimes overtly abetted its proliferation for years, doing so even while supporting sanctions to curb North Korea's independence, and blame the U.S. for inciting the entire crisis to begin with.¹⁵ Even as they vote for UN sanctions against North Korea they covertly aid its survival because they both see it as a potential ally against U.S. hegemony and will not allow Washington to destroy it or provoke a war.¹⁶ China has less leverage on North Korea or willingness to deploy whatever leverage it does possess than Washington continues to believe.¹⁷ While Washington continues to press China to exercise this leverage against Pyongyang and even occasionally threatens a reversal in relations unless Beijing does so, China evidently regards these calls from senior U.S. policymakers as an attempt to pressure it to abandon a buffer state and ally to Washington's unipolar demands or as a pretext for starting a crisis that could lead to war.¹⁸ Naturally, neither outcome is acceptable to China and fears that American policy might engender either or both of these outcomes have galvanized it to seize the diplomatic initiative in unprecedented ways that have strengthened its overall position in Asia and improve its relations with South Korea. Despite North Korea's obduracy, U.S. pressure upon Beijing incurs Chinese resistance and skepticism and also fortifies North Korea's refusal to listen to Beijing.¹⁹ Under the circumstances, China cannot be happy with Washington for putting it in what could be a no-win and even major crisis situation, and resents North Korea for constantly blackmailing it. Nevertheless, though opposing North Korea's nuclearization is a priority for China, preserving peace and stability and an allied government on the peninsula outranks it. China probably has a greater stake in North Korea's stability than anyone else does.

Neither Beijing nor Moscow has any interest in rescuing Washington from its folly. In fact, U.S. policy towards North Korea, rather than loosening the bonds between Pyongyang and Beijing or between Moscow and Beijing, has strengthened the Sino-Russian alliance and convinced both Russia and China to sustain North Korea against America even if it should be restrained from



acting provocatively. They may oppose nuclearization but will not go far enough to stop it and have covertly abetted it.²⁰

Thus, bipartisan illusions in the U.S. have led it to ignore Korean realities and overlook the regional security dimensions of the six party maneuvering around North Korea's nuclearization. Christoph Bluth's observations of a decade ago still hold, namely that,

The political philosophy on which the foreign policy of the Bush Administration was based was incompatible with the realities on the ground in Northeast Asia. None of the key players in the region behaved in a manner compatible with U.S. policy.²¹

By being alert to those regional realities the U.S. might be able to exploit North Korea's visible efforts to escape China's tutelage, turn them to its advantage, and thereby reshape Northeast Asia to preserve its hegemony there and the peace derived from that hegemony which has ensured regional prosperity and democracy.²² Washington has instead chased illusions that are largely of its own making. It should begin by reassessing just why North Korea seeks nuclear weapons.

A Way Out of the Labyrinth

The reasons why North Korea has steadfastly pursued nuclear weapons are well known. The regime fears being isolated (and more bluntly being sold out as it would see things) vis-à-vis the U.S., whom it believes hankers after destroying it and unifying all of Korea. It can no longer compete with the ROK militarily or in any way so nuclear weapons plus the other arrows in its quiver, like chemical and biological weapons, allow it to equalize capabilities with the North. Nuclear weapons not only deter Washington and Seoul, they also intimidate Seoul and possibly serve as weapons of blackmail against Washington whom it can threaten with a nuclear strike if it moves to defend South Korea against a DPRK attack. Certainly American policymakers worry that Pyongyang might think it may be able to intimidate Seoul into preemptive concessions if not outright surrender through nuclear threats and nuclear blackmail of the U.S. given that it may believe South Korea's bottom line is to prevent war. South Korean President Moon Jae-in told a press conference to mark his first 100 days in office "I will prevent war at all cost...I want all South Koreans to believe with confidence that there will be no war."²³ Since the commitment to a unified Korea under the Kim family remains the fundamental objective of the regime, nuclear weapons in the contemporary context are the only way it can

make progress towards that goal. Possession of a credible nuclear deterrent also justifies the sacrifices that the North Korean regime continues to impose on the people under its rule in the name of becoming a great power. Thus, achieving a credible and usable nuclear capability is a fundamental legitimating factor for the North Korean regime. Nuclear capability also allows it to blackmail Japan, Russia, and China into concessions out of fear that the regime may actually cross Seoul, Washington, or any other government's red lines. So these weapons are an instrument of nuclear blackmail against everyone, not just Washington and Seoul. Finally, possession of nuclear weapons is also a manifestation of North Korean resistance to China, whom it clearly resents deeply even though it has substantial economic and past political links.

This last point is insufficiently appreciated but looking at the record of Sino-North Korean relations in the Kim Jong-un era, if not before, reveals mounting acrimony and an increasingly violent effort to purge Chinese influence from the North Korean state. China clearly is unhappy about this, but it dares not move against the regime lest it collapse and invite chaos and the U.S. onto North Korea's territory. Neither will it come down as hard on Pyongyang, despite its anger at North Korean policy and apprehensions about the future regional security equation lest it lose an ally whose persistence in power, for all the tension it generates, drives Washington to despair. In other words, North Korea's nuclear weapons allow it to declare its independence from Chinese tutelage and blackmail Beijing and, to a lesser extent, Moscow because the North Korean regime has believed until now that China may impose severe costs upon it but will not let it surrender to Washington. Even now, as many experts claim that sanctions on North Korea are finally biting, there is growing evidence of sanction-evading activities enabled by Beijing and Moscow, such as cryptocurrency hacking and coal laundering via cargo ships.²⁴ Moreover, the announcement of the dual summits that culminated positive developments in February-March 2018 in the wake of the Olympics—with the North even offering to suspend tests, discuss denuclearization, and acknowledge the legitimacy of U.S.-South Korea military exercises—makes the necessity for coupling a well-conceived diplomatic program with sanctions even more compelling.²⁵ Furthermore, it is now clear that North Korea need not engage China to reach out to Washington. Naturally this immediately triggered Chinese fears that it might be marginalized in the summit, and afterwards those fears ought to be exploited to American advantage.²⁶



Therefore, the continuing bipartisan U.S. belief that the way to a solution is through Beijing represents a profound misreading of the case that only benefits China and North Korea. It benefits China because it gives it space to make enough gestures to the U.S. to keep it happy and show its displeasure with the DPRK's policies while simultaneously refraining from decisive moves that would truly jeopardize North Korean stability.²⁷ It benefits North Korea because it reinforces the DPRK's driving reasons for going nuclear: U.S. pressure and the fear that China might sell it out to make a bargain with Washington. Moreover, if this administration believes, as it says it does, that China is the main adversary of the U.S., then striving to enhance Chinese control over North Korea only adds to its reach and power in Northeast Asia and makes China even more attractive to South Korea.²⁸ Surely a policy that relegates a nuclear North Korea to the status of a Chinese satellite cannot be in the interests of the U.S., South Korea, or Japan. Neither will China pull the U.S.' chestnuts out of the fire at its own expense to gratify Washington's strategic incomprehension. Yet, the U.S. has been outsourcing the North Korean issue to China for over a decade with little or nothing to show for it.²⁹ That fact alone, even if other considerations advanced here are dismissed, should drive a reassessment of U.S. policy and strategy.

Towards a Solution

Although the announcement of the summit was a positive development, much more is needed if the Trump administration seeks to achieve its goals. North Korea may have offered to talk to both South Korea and the United States because of the strong and possibly increasing economic pressure initiated by Washington, which therefore must continue. However, the U.S.—in close coordination with Seoul and Tokyo—must utilize the opportunity provided by this invitation for a summit because no viable military option exists for taking out North Korean nuclear weapons by force or persuading it in advance of the negotiations to give them up. As there is no feasible alternative to a negotiated outcome, this ultimately means accepting North Korea as a nuclear state, but only if this acceptance is tied to strict limitations on its forces and to outcomes that incentivize North Korea to change its policies. The failure of past policies must be acknowledged and in its place the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have the opportunity to recast the North Korean issue and Northeast Asian security on a new, sounder, and more durable basis. Any such framework should include all members of the Six-Party Talks process. Placing the nuclear issue on the negotiating

agenda only makes sense if the parties, i.e. not only Washington, are ready to acknowledge that North Korea is a nuclear power and that dealing with it must take place in a new framework that works for everyone. Otherwise the negotiations will go nowhere, descend into the usual propaganda farce or another round of mutual recriminations, or worse.

Consequently this acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear state must be tied to the creation of a new and legitimate framework of order or equilibrium in Northeast Asia. Its components must include the following points:

1. North Korea will be accepted as a state possessing nuclear weapons. However, the weapons' numbers and range must be capped and subjected to stringent international inspections by the IAEA with the proviso that failure to comply with the inspection regime invalidates the entire agreement. This also means that North Korea should rejoin the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and pledge to abide by its conditions that include strict inspection regimes. That rejoining formally casts North Korea as a nuclear power state and can duly satisfy its desire to be so recognized while also saddling it with the responsibilities that accrue to such states under the treaty.
2. In return for that outcome the parties that signed the 1953 truce (i.e. the formally recognized belligerents in the Korean War) will sign a formal peace treaty ending the state of war and all acts of belligerence among them. This could also entail an examination of troop and artillery placements on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone, the current truce line which would then become a formal international border. This process could be similar to that of the unilateral but reciprocal disarmament by Russia and China of their contentious border zones after 1990. A peace treaty would also include a process for drawing down all sanctions as both parties comply with the agreements and relevant UN resolutions. The two Korean states will sign mutual recognition and cross-security guarantees, and agreements terminating all acts of belligerency as will all the other belligerents and other states in the six-party process. Those agreements recognize the two Korean states as independent states, terminate all acts of belligerency, entailing reciprocal and mutual recognition by all six parties of each other and mutual security guarantees as well as reciprocal security guarantees between both Korean states. These accords take coercive unification off the table and



renounce the use of force. UN peacekeepers with sufficient strength and appropriate rules of engagement to monitor and defend themselves will be deployed to that area to enforce this agreement and monitor the border. This is analogous to the series of treaties involving East and West Germany in 1971-72.

3. The U.S.-ROK alliance remains, as is, i.e. untouched. This includes the right of both sides to conduct exercises on their home territories. Indeed, North Korea admitted as much when it said it had no objections to regularly scheduled U.S.-ROK exercises later this spring.³⁰ Inasmuch as the threat of invasion will gradually diminish and in accordance with the fact that change is the law of life, the parties may modify or change the terms of that alliance as they see fit and since it is and will be purely a defensive alliance, the parties can restructure it as they see fit depending upon circumstances.
4. The parties can then address the issue of the THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense) placement in South Korea against North Korean missiles. To the extent that the missile and nuclear threat from North Korea subsequently diminishes, the U.S. and South Korea can then revisit this issue that has caused so much heartburn to both Moscow and Beijing and that unites them against the U.S.³¹
5. Both Korean states will reaffirm their adherence to existing international protocols concerning chemical and biological warfare and eliminate existing stockpiles as well as open their forces up to international inspection under the relevant existing international protocols.
6. With the mutual recognition of both Koreas and the termination of the state of war, the parties can then agree to offer energy and economic alternatives to North Korea for the use of nuclear power. In this context, it is worth considering approval by the parties of the long-standing Russian projects for a Trans-Siberian and then Trans-Korean gas pipeline to give the DPRK opportunities to obtain cleaner gas and tariffs from this pipeline so that it has access to international energy markets.³² This also gives Russia a buy-in to the agreement, reduces China's economic leverage on North Korea, and thus its political leverage as well. It also offers the U.S. an opportunity to play its strongest card of economic power to gain a lasting voice in Pyongyang and leverage upon its policies.

This framework will allow Russia to have a stronger footing in both Koreas as part of its Asian pivot and duly reduce its need for Chinese support against the U.S. so that it can play a more independent role in Asia, something that benefits Washington much more than it benefits Beijing.³³

North Korea too gains thereby because it can then concentrate, as it professes to want to do, on economic development and on reducing the militarization of the regime. It will also have more room not only to play its traditional balancing game between Moscow and Beijing and between Washington and its erstwhile Communist allies, but also this series of accords can also help ameliorate conditions inside North Korea. Nobody should have illusions that miraculously upon conclusion of the agreement a regime change will take place or that regime evolution (a very different concept) will be rapid. But, processes benefitting the people of North Korea will have been set in motion and the government will have to respond to them. This agreement will therefore not bring Nirvana, but it can measurably improve the security and human climate on the Korean Peninsula.

Likewise, nobody should labor under the illusion that this will be a short negotiation. It will be a protracted process with ups and downs. But, precisely because it takes North Korea seriously and makes it a tangible offer of coming out of the cold it is possible that despite all Pyongyang's chicanery and attempts to hold out for better terms or for surrender (which this most assuredly is not) it will be loath to terminate the negotiations because it has no better option. If it truly fears the destruction that is inevitable if no diplomatic process ensues, North Korea will probably, for all its usual bad behavior, not want to assume the responsibility for a failure of a serious diplomatic project. Should Pyongyang undermine such a framework, it will blame Washington as it has always done, though sympathy would be much harder to come by because of the peace broker role assumed by the United States. While nobody should assume that the regime will suddenly become liberal or democratic, it may be more constrained and calmer because it has something to lose, which is not the case now. Certainly Kim Jong-un is much more concerned than were his predecessors to bring something like prosperity to North Korea and thus economic factors will likely play a bigger role in his political and strategic calculations.³⁴



Moreover, this process offers something to all of the six parties. The U.S. would be making an offer that China cannot refuse without incurring serious risk to its position. Indeed, if this agreement or something like it is attained, Northeast Asia will then be placed on a much more secure footing of a viable and durable legal-political-strategic equilibrium that offers Beijing fewer opportunities to threaten that status quo as it stands to lose a great deal by doing so. Since everyone benefits while making sacrifices, they all will have much to lose if someone breaks that equilibrium and that should act as a restraining factor upon any government that harbors such designs. Japan and South Korea gain peace, increased security, and opportunities to deal with a North Korea that is freer of China for mutual economic and political gain. Russia too gains the same things along with the possibility of reduced military tensions due to the possible fading away of the threat that now justifies THAAD, which it resents. This would also benefit China. It too gains more room for independent action along with enhanced status as a guarantor of the accords within an accepted international framework.

Finally, Washington gains too as the nuclear threat is capped, tensions are reduced, and economic-political opportunities for moving North Korea and Russia out of China's orbit grow. It then becomes possible to initiate a dialogue with North Korea that in the long-term can create a basis for its integration into a regional and broader Asian security order. The U.S. also gains the moral high ground, since it will no longer be able to be characterized as the main obstacle to peace. Furthermore, Washington also gains peace and security as well as an opportunity for a regularized channel of interaction with North Korea that was sorely lacking. A solution along these lines would provide a template that could be useful in dealing with any subsequent efforts by signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, e.g. Iran, to break out of that legal-political status. And at the same time, should the agreements ultimately break down in the long run, the fact that North Korea had not made meaningful progress in its nuclear capabilities would redound to Seoul and Washington's benefit as they would now be in a stronger position to deal with North Korea.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the framework put forward in this paper may not be a perfect alternative, but few are in the "the land of bad options." Adjusting the multiple interests of the diverse players

will be a long, drawn-out, and complicated process requiring the utmost of statesmanship and diplomacy. This requirement is particularly demanding as until now, according to Russian experts, North Korea has presented itself to the world as being utterly impervious to either economic threats or incentives.³⁵ On the other hand, South Korean President Moon Jae-in attributes North Korea's negotiation initiative to the result of President Trump's maximum economic-political-military pressure on North Korea that is liable to grow still further if there is no negotiation.³⁶ But those processes, however frustrating, are far superior to the real possibility that North Korea and/or the U.S. will be driven by their respective military fantasies and frustrations concerning the utility of nuclear blackmail or preventive so called limited strikes.

Furthermore, as it should be clear to all that continuing maximum economic-political-military pressure without attempting to negotiate in a serious way can only lead to a catastrophe. This paper is not advocating that the U.S. renounce those pressures, especially as they may have been instrumental in motivating Pyongyang to offer a negotiation.³⁷ Indeed, the combination of credible, steady and even growing economic and military pressures are what have deterred North Korea until now and remain the only basis upon which it can be brought to the table. Therefore, that policy should continue but it must be part of a strategy aiming at a truly negotiated settlement.

This set of proposals are just that, proposals, not dogma. But an honest assessment of the present situation should lead everyone to understand that refusal on the part of any of the parties to negotiate risks a descent into the maelstrom of war, the worst of all possible worlds. The idea that North Korea can blackmail Washington and Seoul into surrender or that Washington can launch a "limited war" upon North Korea are illusions born of fantasies of power and of frustration with an intractable status quo.

A century ago William Butler Yeats admonished his countrymen that, "we have fed the heart with illusions, our hearts have grown brutal on the fare." Surely the U.S. is not so bereft of the mental and moral resources to understand that it is pursuing a course that can only lead to a catastrophic dead end and free itself from those illusions before that brutality becomes the reality.



Endnotes

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