

North Korea Is Not Desperate: The New Geostrategic Environment in East Asia

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The discussion surrounding the surprise meeting at the DMZ between US President Donald Trump and DPRK State Affairs Commission Chairman Kim Jong Un has shown a remarkable ignorance of the fact that North Korea is by no means desperate to strike a deal with the Americans. Pyongyang would certainly appreciate the lifting of sanctions, a peace treaty, investment and trade, but it has other options, too. The emerging bipolar world dominated by the US and China opens new maneuvering space for North Korea. China is now again inclined to support its neighbor economically and politically. Washington needs to understand this to avoid overplaying what is still a strong hand. The arrest of Australian student Alek Sigley implies a renewed readiness of some circles in North Korea to challenge the West, and marks an end to the relatively open access that was granted to Western visitors as long as they followed a few simple rules. This change can only be rooted in a heightened confidence that China, and perhaps also to a lesser degree Russia, will have North Korea's back. Although it is not clear whether President Trump understands it, he has for the second time slowed down this process and brought the US back into the game on the Korean Peninsula. For how long, however, remains to be seen.

Misinterpreting North Korea's situation is dangerous. If talks are based on the assumption that Pyongyang needs a deal, and that it believes it can only reach one with Trump, then it would be tempting to believe that concessions can be extracted from the North Koreans before the 2020 US presidential election. If he is not reelected, and that is a big "if," the window of opportunity will have closed. That much is true: the [recent remarks](#) by Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden imply that a new US administration would return to the previous policies of "dismantle first, then we talk," (also known as complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization, or CVID), and "let's do nothing and hope the problem will solve itself" (strategic patience).

But this judgment is based on the expectation that North Korea, like any other country in the world, will be technically unable to achieve high economic growth if the US does not want that. The logic behind this is, more or less, that no company or country of any significant size would dare violate a US or US-backed embargo on trade, financial transactions, and technology transfer. This argument, however, might not hold true for that much longer in a changing geopolitical landscape. North Korea could well become a pioneer in this regard. From its founding until around 1990, it had already been able to benefit greatly from a bipolar world order. Cold War 2.0 is coming between the US and China. For Europe, with its dependency on global supply chains and free trade, this will be catastrophic. But North Korea might once again be able to benefit from such a situation, like it did under Kim Jong Un's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, who was, as even his opponents agree, a master in extracting concessions from economically and militarily superior partners.

This is not hypothetical. If South Korean figures are correct, Pyongyang has accumulated a trade deficit of a remarkable 26.6 billion US dollars since 1990, according to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Corporation's (KOTRA) annual trade reports. That is ten times the country's export volume of the fairly successful year 2015. North Korea has been, even under the complicated conditions of the last three decades of a unipolar world order, able to find someone who was willing to pay its bills. Imagine what would happen if support for North Korea, no matter what a difficult ally it might be, becomes a matter of principle again for a great power, as was the case before the Soviet Union imploded.

The pink elephant in the room is, of course, China. Under Xi Jinping, Beijing is giving up its long-standing "hide your strength, bide your time" policy. If there is only a grain of truth in realist international relations theory, then a massive clash of interests with the US is inevitable. In fact, it is happening already. The cases of the trade war and of Huawei in the economic field, of the South China Sea in foreign policy, and of Hong Kong in domestic policy are exemplary. China is willing to openly confront and challenge the West and its values.

The effects of US policy need to be seen against this background. China is trying to push the United States out of East Asia, which it regards as its backyard. The Korean Peninsula could become the first manifest example of that strategic ambition, and a test case for how Washington and the rest of the world will react. For the second time after 2018, Trump has brought the US back into the game. His unconventional and seemingly erratic approach has for now saved China from having to openly act against the hitherto tough and uncompromising US and United Nations line on North Korea, and it saved the US from having to respond to such an open challenge. The contrast could not be bigger between the behavior of US Vice President Mike Pence during the Pyeongchang Olympics, when he refused to even look at Kim Jong Un's sister and remained seated ostentatiously when the two Korean teams marched in, and President Trump's forthcoming and friendly way of dealing with Kim Jong Un.



Trump and Kim meet Sunday before Trump became first US president to step on North Korean territory.
(White House photo)

The handshake at the DMZ on June 30, 2019 was only arranged a day or so before it

happened. It came less than two weeks after the first official state visit in 14 years by a Chinese leader to North Korea, and only a few days after the arrest of a Westerner who had been tweeting about everyday stuff in North Korea. At that time, four months after the failed Hanoi Summit, Pyongyang was running out of patience. The political cost of having Western visitors in the country was, correctly, calculated to be higher than the minuscule economic benefit they created. Even if each of the roughly [5,000 Western tourists](#) who visit North Korea annually spends 2,000 US dollars per visit on average (usually it is less), that amounts to no more than 10 million US dollars of revenue in exchange for letting in, from North Korea's perspective, 5,000 potential spies and journalists every year. That is now obviously deemed too little by North Korea's decision makers, especially with the expectation of exploding numbers of Chinese tourists after the return to a cooperative relationship. North Korea is moving away from the West and towards China, where it has also recently become complicated and dangerous to conduct research without being accused of espionage, as shown, for example, in the cases of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig.

For the time being, this shift has been slowed down by the DMZ handshake. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that anything that the West would consider field research will now likely be seen by the North Korean authorities as espionage, and treated accordingly. The speed and relative ease of the release of Australian Kim Il Sung University student Alek Sigley, who had been detained in Pyongyang on June 25, suggests a still strong interest of North Korea in a positive relationship with the West and in particular the US. At this point, the last thing North Korea needed was another Otto Warmbier case that would not match the smiling faces at Panmunjom.

Kim Jong Un's attempt at maintaining a close relationship with both superpowers is a reasonable approach. Ever since the days of his grandfather, North Korea disliked depending too much on only one side. But this is a strategic line, not a sign of desperation. Heavy dependency on China is clearly not preferred by anyone in North Korea, but it is not a disaster. If the US overestimates its own value for North Korea, and overplays its hand, then China is available as a backup option or a "new way," as Kim Jong Un [hinted](#) in his 2019 New Year's speech.

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