Is a Korean peace any closer?

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There she was. All 5 feet and 4 inches of her. Perky, yet self-effacing and plainly dressed, with no ostentatious display of materialistic adornments or personal embellishment, the South Korean media fawned over the comportment and appearance of the 30-year-old younger sister of Kim Jong-Un at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics.

There was little content in the message that Kim Yo-Jung carried to South Korea and the world. Yet, symbols and gestures matter as much as substance in international affairs. To wit, North Korea has invited South Korean President Moon Jae-In to Pyongyang. President Moon remains open to the invitation.

But what about the substantive questions behind these gestures: How significant are these gestures? Will the thaw continue? Is the "spirit of Pyeongchang" likely to have a lasting impact on the Korean peninsula and the world? Or will it be a harbinger of the ghost of Chamberlain's "peace in our time"?

Like the multiple stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance — unwinding conflict between nations also needs to pass through a series of stages. Contact, then thawing, then détente, then rapprochement, then normalisation. No skipping allowed.

To be sure, thawing does not inevitably lead to rapprochement, even less to amicability. The residual liquid that accompanies the thawing must be cleaned up and managed. Managed well, could this thawing lead to an Entente Cordiale in East Asia? If managed ineptly, will it at least ease tensions between North and South?

There is no simple answer. The complexity is thanks to the untidy balance of power in East Asia. The bilateral security commitments between Washington and Seoul, and Washington and Tokyo are no less important because of the absence of a Nato-like Article 5 collective assurance of retaliation. But because they are bilateral, North Korea, along with China, can pry loose alliance ties. Strength lies in numbers – be it the composition of military force or the organization of allies.

The cohesion of the alliance between Washington and Seoul is linked to the credibility of America's extended nuclear deterrence. The recently released Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) anticipates the considerations of employing low-yield, highly precise nuclear warheads and highly accurate cruise missiles for possible use in a conflict that may not necessitate the use of higher yield, less accurate warheads.

NPR proponents argue that high-yield weapons undermine the credibility of deterrence (primary and extended), and that lower yield, but more accurate weapons, enhance the credibility of extended deterrence. The political question of alliance credibility, posed by DeGaulle, and more colourfully paraphrased by President Trump in another context, remains difficult to deny: will the United States sacrifice New York for Paris? In the Korean context, will the US sacrifice San Francisco for Seoul? Under the logic of the new NPR, the US wants to avoid that dilemma by signalling to friend and foe

alike that more layered lethal measures can offer more credible options. This posture obviates the need for a maximalist approach in Korea and buttresses the assurances of extended deterrence.

Critics argue that the NPR would encourage leaders to be less wary of using nuclear weapons in a conflict. They point out that employing lower yield weapons is tantamount to lowering the threshold for nuclear usage and claim that nuclear war has to be so appalling and unthinkable that any consideration of usage has to be extirpated from the minds of decision makers. Accordingly, allies such as South Korea and Japan would be further alienated and alarmed if the employment of nuclear weapons became a much more likely consideration. After all, any nuclear exchange between the United States and North Korea will take place on allied territory. This would exacerbate allies' concerns about the fear of war, thus degrading rather than enhancing extended deterrence.

Whichever side one takes, the debate over the NPR is a debate about the integrity and credibility of Washington's defence commitments in Korea. So how do the allies view such postures? That depends on where they are on the political spectrum.

South Korea is a testbed for Washington's defence commitments. This is where the rubber meets the road. Theories and concepts of deterrence come face to face with political and military reality here. And the reality on the ground is, again, complicated. While deterrence is a simple and clear formula, it requires a complex calculus. Deterrence works when both intention and capacity are credibly believed — simultaneously.

The steady but relentless build-up of military assets around and surrounding Korea remains unabated. Defense Secretary James Mattis undoubtedly adheres to the motto of the Roman general Vegetius – if you want peace, prepare for war. Mattis has operational combat experience. He knows war and how to fight one and win. That adds credibility to the intention, capacity, and commitment of the United States to denuclearise North Korea. Japan adheres to the hardline approach, while China continues to try to split the difference.

Meanwhile, the euphoria of hosting another Olympics is widespread throughout South Korea. The consequential pride is genuine and growing. But despite media excess, the quiet majority of South Korean society is deeply ambivalent, if not downright hostile, to what they perceive as North Korea's hijacking of Seoul's spotlight. Government officials or a university professors might be positive. But ask a taxi driver or restaurant worker and they wonder why the North Korean interlopers are given more attention and coverage.

It was South Korea that hosted the games. The younger generation that has never known poverty, nor the destitution and despair of the Korean War, is baffled by the obsequiousness of North Korean-sympathising citizens and belittles the unctuousness of government officials.

Moreover, many in the South Korean foreign policy establishment carelessly toss around the term, "Korea passing." Actually, this is a misnomer. What they mean to say is that they feel Korea is being bypassed. But if that is the case, then Seoul has no one but itself to blame. The South Korean government is allowing itself to be bypassed in the name of dialogue and reconciliation. It is one thing to accommodate to compromise, to modify. It is another thing to bend over backwards so far that you fall over. That is what South Korea is doing.

It's not hard to imagine Kim Jong-Un's happiness at South Korea's eagerness to negotiate. But Kim's happiness won't last long. If there is a formidable match for his unpredictability, President Trump qualifies in spades. The stereotypical view of Trump as an out of control madman is just that – a caricature. In fact he is using unpredictability to gain leverage.

Many observers denigrate President Trump as a deal-maker. But you don't get very far in the construction business in New York by not knowing how to negotiate. There is a reason why North Korea would prefer to talk to the likes of the last negotiating team than a Donald Trump.

Whether the bilateral summit between Kim Jong-Un and Moon Jae-In occurs or not, South Korea must steer between the Scylla of President Trump's full-throated approach to denuclearise North Korea and the Charybdis of domestic desiderata for some form of reconciliation. Such deft steering of the ship of state is what differentiates a statesman from a mere politician.

For now, the cycle of on-again, off-again thawing and freezing, without a genuine vision of détente, rapprochement, or normalisation, will age rather than tenderise the meat of diplomatic statecraft. The next few months will determine whether the statesmen of our time can put us on a path that aspires to denuclearise North Korea, as the first real step toward reconciliation, or drag us stumbling towards the road to war.

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