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Trump, Kim and Moon: Speed Bumps on the Road to Singapore

Recent developments, such as the battle of words between the North Koreans and the Americans, appear to be calling into question the planned summit between United States President Donald Trump and North Korea's Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un in Singapore on 12 June 2018. A cancellation of the event would be most unfortunate. South Korea's President Moon Jae-in is travelling to Washington to try salvage the situation. Should he succeed in putting the rails of peace back on the track again, it would have positive ramifications, both for the region, including South Asia, and the world.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Just when all seemed set for a rewarding trip to Singapore for the parley planned on 12 June for United States' (US) President Donald Trump and North Korea's Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un, speed bumps suddenly seemed to make their appearance on the road ahead. These were always there, but an over-enthusiastic White House had been turning a Nelson's blind-eye to that reality, till Kim and his men pointed them out. This, they did, after some days of silence following what seemed curiously close to the conduct of victory laps by the other set of protagonists in the White House, Trump and his team. Trump was revelling in his

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diplomatic success in bringing Kim to the negotiating table. He saw this as a great leap forward from what his predecessors had achieved. Conciliatory signals from Pyongyang, such as the release of the three American hostages and promises, indeed preparations, to dismantle nuclear weapon test-sites (though not the weapons) were read, or misread, as pre-talk triumphs. A Nobel Prize for Trump was even being spoken of to bring him at par with President Barack Obama in his early months. Trump's National Security Adviser even went so far as to refer to the 'Libya model' to discuss his preferred mode of the dismantling of Kim's capabilities. In doing so, he perhaps overlooked the tragic fate that befell the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi thereafter, a fact that Kim had surely made a mental note of. A military exercise of the US and South Korean forces with the daunting name of "Max Thunder" was put in place, though billed as 'routine'.

With sufficient delay, which seemed long enough to lure the other side deep into the negotiating frame, as a spider would do by inviting a fly into its web, the North Korean side reacted – negatively by all counts. By describing "Max Thunder" as being counter to the spirit of the recent Panmunjom Declaration between Kim and his South Korean counterpart, President Moon Jae-in, the North called off working level contacts with the South. The invoking of the memories of Libya had gone down badly in Pyongyang. The North Koreans unsurprisingly were no admirers of White House National Security Adviser John Bolton, as in the past, he had advocated strong measures vis-à-vis their country. So, Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, no doubt with the green signal from his political master, risked appearing to be a damp squib when he, with ominous overtones, stated last week, "We are no longer interested in a negotiation that will be all about driving us into a corner and making a one-sided demand for us to give up our nukes and this would force us to reconsider whether we would accept the North Korea-US summit meeting."² That was nothing short of throwing a spanner into the wheel of the much-heralded planned meeting of Kim and Trump.

Much of the involved parties went into a tizzy almost immediately. Almost everyone considered the upcoming talks critical to peace to the region and the world. There was the possibility that the curtain would be brought down on the Korean War, which began in 1953,

² "North Korea Threatens to Cancel Trump-Kim Summit Over Drills", The Associated Press, *The New York Times*, 15 May 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2018/05/15/world/asia/ap-as-koreas-tension.html>. Accessed on 20 May 2018.

finally with a peace treaty; that the North Koreans will conclude their aggressive policy of sharpening and honing their nuclear capabilities (though complete disarmament does not now appear to have been on their cards) and, thereby, reduce and finally eliminate tensions in the peninsula and with major global actors; that peace would come to the Koreas and prosperity for all concerned would not be too far beyond the rim of the saucer. Ultimately, the goal of Korean unification would be achieved.

So, obviously the North was going to play hard ball. Kim was absolutely reluctant to give up all his options now for rewards to be had later. His preferred mode of negotiation was action for action, a phased progression along a carefully-calibrated path to the fruition of understandings to be struck at the forthcoming summit in Singapore. The renegeing by Trump on earlier US promises, with regard to Iran, was a signal that, henceforth, agreements must be backed up by sounder measures. The clear signal was that some very tough bargaining lay ahead and there was not going to be a walk over for either side.

It seemed that there is appreciation in Pyongyang as to what was a sine qua non for allowing them to be invited to Singapore in the first place. They assumed that it was their deterrence power, the ability to hold off any purported aggressor with the threat of the capacity to inflict an unacceptable level of damage. They were like David whose lethal strength was already apparent to the mighty Goliath before the conflict, unlike in the Biblical parable, and Goliath was now eager for a talk. As such, they hoped that the parties would accept those realities and then hold discussions that would hopefully finally lead to the cessation of all concerns.

This would have ramifications for the wider region – Southeast Asia and South Asia. The takeaway would be that there is no Gordian knot that stands in the path of peace which cannot be cut. There would be lessons from this for, say, India and Pakistan, to draw upon. It would be that persistent and relentless endeavours can relieve the strains of most strenuous relationships among and between states.

Much now lies on the shoulders of South Korea's Moon. He is travelling to Washington to meet Team Trump. To his credit, Trump has, so far, restrained from issuing any troubling tweets on the issue on hand. There is nothing to suggest he is not for peace, at least in the first instance. Moon has been smelling like roses through the crisis. He has amply demonstrated

that it is not necessarily foolish to rush in, or at least wade in, where angels fear to tread. He has done this by alleviating past ill-will with the North. He has made the best endeavours to carry all parties – the US, North Korea, Japan and even China – in a caravan heading towards the defusing of one of the greatest crisis slides of our times. He has created a very onerous situation for himself as to be a conduit between the US and North Korea. This, for the sake of the nation of the Koreans. If he is able to pull it off, he would have carved for himself a niche in the pantheon of contemporary heroes.

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