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Forecasting the Future: Prospects of a Negotiated Settlement with North Korea

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One of the aspects that political scientists harp on when assessing anyone's research is the baseline from which deviations are measured. Without a solid understanding of the baseline of an event, no meaningful change can be discussed. One of the things that Phillip Tetlock and Dan Gardner do so well in their book *Superforecasting* is explain a methodology that allows someone to unemotionally estimate a baseline. When one follows their methodology, one can often see fallacious overestimations of the success or failure of a future event. We use this methodology and conclude that the much-hyped meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong Un is likely to produce no meaningful compromise and because of the very strong war-like stance President Trump took prior to the proposed meeting, it may end up increasing rather than decreasing the odds of an armed overthrow of the Un regime in North Korea.

Cracks in the narrative that the meeting between President Trump and dictator Un would be "historical" or mark a change in the North Korean stance on nuclear weapons began appearing recently when President Trump abruptly cancelled the meeting. The meeting was quickly reinstated and is slated to take place on June 12 but what is more worrisome is President Trump's changing expectations. No longer is he demanding Un renounce his nuclear program and he has instead started to sound like every President before him arguing that the negotiations will take time to accomplish any meaningful results.

This is a far cry from the early bluster from President Trump demanding change. In fact, Trump backed up his words with a startling increase in US military presence in the region holding one of the largest joint military exercises just across the border from Un in April of this year. Trump also increased the number of carrier strike groups in the region for a time in Asia. All of this military escalation has been ramped down prior to the meeting with Un and perhaps Un is interpreting this as weakness as the two drift into a familiar dance of North Korean false promises, stalling, and stonewalling as the nuclear program in North Korea slowly trudges ahead.

With the proper baseline in place, all of this would have been fairly predictable. Tetlock and Gardner simply ask forecasters to put their emotions to one side and simply answer one simple question in this case: How many times in the past seventy years have negotiations between the United States and North Korea produced meaningful results? The answer is none. Therefore, the baseline for any anticipation of future success is zero or, to put it another way, one should unemotionally begin with a 100% failure rate for negotiations between the United States and North Korea.

Now we have to ask ourselves what intervening variables might bring this baseline down in order that we might better understand the unique circumstances of this current negotiation event. There are several encouraging variables. First, China appears to be increasingly dissatisfied with the Un regime referring to Un himself as "little fatty" and, more importantly, cutting off vital oil to North Korea in a physical manifestation of their dissatisfaction with the regime. Second, the food and health situation seems particularly dire in North Korea as even defectors from Un's elite guard seem malnourished and riddled with parasites. Therefore, the food situation may be direr than it was in the past. Finally, President Trump had acted in a far more aggressive fashion than any other President in recent history.

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Taken together, these unique factors could push our prediction of negotiated failure down to the 70% or 80% range but we see even with all of these factors in place that the propensity for North Korea to fail to give meaningful concessions through negotiation is strong. We have to temper our increased optimism here as well because two of the factors pushing our prediction of successful negotiation upward are now in question. China has not continued its pressure on North Korea economically and President Trump has released much of the military pressure and strong diplomatic language so only the dire food and health situation in North Korea remains in place as significant variable pushing negotiations forward.

Recently, though, there is some more hope for optimism. It appears that Secretary of Defense Mattis has recognized that the old pattern of non-productive negotiations is rearing its ugly head and he is proposing reinstating the US military pressure. Such a recognition is important if this systemic cycle is to be broken.

By approaching the negotiations between the United States and North Korea through a systematic, unemotional fashion one is forced to face the harsh reality that these negotiations are very likely to fail just like all of the past negotiations. Until meaningful changes are put into place consistently increasing the pressure on Un, history tells us that nothing will change. At least one major player on the US side seems to recognize this so while this round of negotiations might fit into the old pattern of failing to produce meaningful results, if US policymakers can recognize and manipulate the proper pressure variables, things might begin to look brighter in the future.

About the author:

Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.