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Trump's 'Personalised' North Korea Policy: 2018–2020 and the Way Forward

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ANGANA GUHA ROY, SEP 8 2020

Two years after President Donald Trump announced on Twitter that “there is no longer a threat from North Korea”, the likelihood of achieving stability and nuclear disarmament in the Korean Peninsula looks as distant as it ever has been in recent years. North Korea remains at the centre of discussions on nuclear security in East Asia. North Korea's continued advancement of its nuclear and missiles programmes has sparked widespread concerns in the region. Further, the wrecking of the inter-Korean liaison office on June 16 has served as a warning to South Korea and also reflected Kim Jong-un's exasperation with the Trump administration. North Korea has turned down any possibility of holding another summit with the US before the presidential elections.

Two years ago, what looked like the start of an extraordinary diplomatic initiative aimed at resolving the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, has turned out to be short-lived and failed to deliver common ground. The mounting rhetoric and actions by North Korea in the recent past have signalled both the failure of President Donald Trump's summit diplomacy and hopes for inter-Korean reconciliation. Is there a way to carry forward a dialogue with North Korea?

The Trump Approach

Before Donald Trump took over the US Presidency, the US had for years pursued a variety of policies to meet the challenges posed by a nuclear North Korea, including enhanced military co-operation with its allies in the region, wide ranging sanctions and non-proliferation measures such as export controls. The US also engaged in major diplomatic initiatives (adherence to Non-Proliferation Treaty and six-Party talks) to make North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons programme in return for aid. None of these turned out to be fruitful.

President Trump tried to break free from the diplomatic approaches of previous administrations and cultivate a personal equation with the North Korean supremo, presumably to instil mutual confidence in the dialogue. However, President Trump's approach also did not revisit the bargaining stance of the US in the negotiations, sticking to the old policy which did not allow North Korea to undertake a gradual process of denuclearisation. President Trump's policy framework was the same as that of earlier US administrations – a complete and fully verifiable denuclearisation as the first step, and then a move towards peace, reconciliation, sanctions relief and stability.

What President Trump thought was a grand bargain for North Korea to trade all its nuclear weapons for a withdrawal of American-led sanctions hurting its economy thus had no novelty in it; President Trump's “personal diplomacy” was not convincing enough for North Korea to agree to America's denuclearisation demand at one go.

Meanwhile, President Trump emphasised that his personalised diplomacy with Kim was the reason why a war was averted. He boasted of “peace” and his “personal relationship with Kim Jong-un” at the NATO Summit in December 2019. However, according to reports, from May 2019 onwards North Korea “tested more missiles than it has in any other year in its history”, except possibly 2016. However, President Trump's investment in a policy based on maximum pressure and personal diplomacy could not win much for America. The few payoffs included an unprecedented one-on-one meeting between an American President and the North Korean supremo, a partially destroyed nuclear test site and the return of the remains of US soldiers.

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Loopholes in President Trump's Bargaining Strategy

First, mixed messages are detrimental to the success of diplomatic initiatives. While North Korea's diplomatic efforts towards the US and South Korea had been alternatively hot and cold, the US too did not follow a uniform approach. President Trump's willingness to meet the North Korean supremo at the demilitarised zone in June 2019 was announced days after Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Beigun ruled out such possibility before the US elections. More recently, after President Trump expressed his interest in meeting Kim Jong-un, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo downplayed the possibility of another summit between the two leaders.

In fact, the US has been consistent in pursuing contradictory policies, creating layers of misunderstanding between the parties to the negotiation. In 2017, in the wake of rising tensions in the Korean Peninsula, President Trump's statements contradicted those of his top officials on several occasions. Again in 2018, President Trump's "no more war games" statement during his post-Singapore summit press conference was probably misread by North Korea as a high level policy statement and firm commitment. However, the South Korea-US joint annual military drill Dong Maeng was conducted in August 2019 without any clarification from President Trump's side.

Second, President Trump's casual dismissal of the significance of North Korea's missile tests last year only encouraged North Korea to continue with its brinkmanship. While 2019 marked the highest number of missile tests by North Korea, President Trump downgraded their importance by referring to them as "very standard" tests.

Third, the Trump administration's continuous demonstration of ethical compromises further encouraged Kim Jong-un to intensify his pressure campaign to maximise gains. The Trump administration's downplaying of North Korea's human rights atrocities by stalling a UN Security Council meeting in 2019 signalled its compromising attitude and reduced the priority the US attached to human rights issues, while persisting with reliance on personal diplomacy with Kim. President Trump's declaration of Kim Jong-un as an honourable partner overlooking the death of Otto Warmar (a student who was detained in North Korea in 2016 and died after being repatriated to the United States after 17 months of captivity and the murder of Kim Jong-un's half-brother only showed how eager he was to arrive at a "deal" with North Korea.

Fourth, although inter-Korean relations have plummeted in the recent past, the United States needs to recognise South Korea's role and importance as a partner in easing the crisis in the Korean Peninsula. Instead, President Trump has called South Korea a defence free rider referring to the US-ROK combined exercises as both expensive and threatening to North Korea. In fact, it has been assumed that in case President Trump gets re-elected to a second term, he might consider a partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Peninsula, not just to address defence-sharing costs but to provide an additional political incentive to Kim to reach a common negotiating ground. President Trump's handling of South Korea has led experts to question his understanding of relevant geopolitical and security issues.

Overlooking the Armistice Agreement

President Trump's personal diplomacy has not paid off. After repeated failures, the US refuses to recognise North Korea's non-negotiable demand for gradual denuclearisation. Therefore, we need to examine what offers better prospects to carry forward a dialogue with North Korea. The answer perhaps lies in bringing an end to the 70-year-old armistice and replacing it with a Peace Treaty.

The Korean Armistice Agreement brought an end to hostilities of the Korean War. However, until the agreement gets replaced, the US and North Korea are still technically in a state of war. Even after South Korea's request to the US for an 'end-of-Korean war declaration' as a prelude to replacing the armistice with a peace treaty on the Korean peninsula, the US has formally not responded on the subject. An end-of-war declaration by the US would be a symbolic diplomatic measure, increasing North Korea's confidence in a denuclearisation agreement.

The wariness of the US regarding the 'end-of-Korean war declaration' should be seen in a broader context: First, for America, the presence of its troops in South Korea works as a deterrent to North Korea. Second, it helps the US to

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maintain a military footprint in mainland East Asia, which facilitates its grand strategy. Third, it would mean weakening the US-South Korea alliance and consequently, a weakening of the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral agreement. With China emerging as United States' prime challenger in the Indo-Pacific, the importance of the alliance with South Korea and the trilateral agreement will only increase in the future. Japan, which is an ally of the US and an important regional player, wants an assured reduction in the nuclear threat through complete denuclearisation of North Korea.

It would be interesting to note here that the North Korean State News Agency indicated in a 2018 commentary that Pyongyang would take steps such as "eternal dismantlement of its nuclear complex, if the US takes a corresponding step". The chances of securing a post-US elections nuclear deal is highly unlikely, but a step or statement signalling some progress towards the end of the 1953 armistice can perhaps open further channels of communication between the US and North Korea.

Although President Trump has talked about reducing the presence of US troops in the Korean Peninsula, he has never formally acknowledged the need for an 'end-of-Korean war declaration'. Hence, even if the US pursues a policy of reducing its troop presence in Korea, it will not guarantee an 'end-of-Korean war declaration'. Peace treaties are based on common objectives, provisions, and schemes; they aim for a permanent resolution of hostilities between two warring nations. The initiation of a peace treaty would enable North Korea and the US to gradually come to a common understanding on denuclearisation.

Conclusion

A fourth Trump-Kim Summit meeting ahead of the US elections appears highly unlikely, as does progress towards reaching a balanced agreement which meets the policy goals of the US and North Korea.

The American media has already turned Trump's North Korea policy as a failed gambit. However, while Trump's approach to dealing with North Korea was new, his predecessors (Bush and Obama) were as unsuccessful in finding solutions to the longstanding problem. Pew Research Centre survey has revealed that at least 33 countries approve of Trump's North Korea policy, indicating that his innovative diplomatic style, if not successful, was also not seen as damaging from an outsider's perspective.

Although North Korea has mounted a sharp war of words rejecting any possibility of a fourth Trump-Kim summit, it has not completely closed its channels of communication. That was apparent at least on two recent occasions. First, Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Jo-Yong, while expressing her doubts about holding a fourth summit this year, expressed her willingness to share her impressions on the US Independence Day celebration telecast and "personally obtain" the DVD of the celebration in the future, indicating her interest in the US. Second, a few days after South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul stepped down over worsening ties, North Korea suspended military action plans against South Korea, indicating its wish to not take things too far. However, as per the latest reports, US weapons experts say North Korea is preparing its first submarine-launched ballistic missile test. New Satellite images posted by experts at Beyond Parallel indicate "presence of several vessels within the secure boat basin – one of which resembles vessels previously used to tow the submersible test stand barge out to sea". Another potential indicator stated in the report is "two Romeo-class submarines anchored within the base that experts say could be used as escorts for an SLBM test maneuver". If the reports are proven right, it would defy the threshold requirements of engagement with the US.

The current scenario clearly sends out a message to the world that North Korea will not settle for any dialogue based on past proposals of complete denuclearisation in return for a lifting of sanctions and full normalisation. To revive prospects of a comprehensive peace on the Korean peninsula, both a new grand bargain and personal diplomacy will have to be on offer.

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