

# The more things change...

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by Dr Victor Cha

What is both amazing and depressing about the diplomacy following the Singapore Summit are the constants that have re-emerged following a period of arguably the most dramatic change we have witnessed on the Korean Peninsula in decades. 2017 saw President Donald Trump's penchant for a military strike on North Korea and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's talk of turning Washington, D.C. into a sea of fire as he tested ICBMs that could range the US homeland. I had never heard more talk about military options inside the Beltway in over 20 years than I did in 2017. This path to war was abruptly altered in early 2018 with the PyeongChang Winter Olympics and deft diplomacy by the South Koreans to facilitate two inter-Korean summits and the meeting between Trump and Kim. And yet three months after Trump and Kim's unprecedented summit, the same dynamics repeat. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Firstly, despite the Panmunjeom (inter-Korean) and Singapore (US-North Korea) summits' proclamations about a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, North Korea still pursues its strategy of byungjin – the pursuit of nuclear weapons status and economic development. The media's focus since the Singapore Summit on Kim Jong-un's expressed desire to improve the economic conditions in the country misses the fact that these aspirations are not held in lieu of nuclear weapons, but in conjunction with the November 2017 announcement that the regime had completed its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile testing. It's called having your cake and eating it too.

What is both amazing and depressing about the diplomacy following the Singapore Summit are the constants that have re-emerged following a period of the most dramatic change on the Peninsula in decades. North Korea still pursues its byungjin strategy while the US still pursues CVID. China undercuts economic pressure on the North through commerce, while South Korea presses ahead with an inter-Korean cooperation agenda ahead of denuclearisation. And no one seems to care about human rights abuses propagated by the regime. It's unclear whether a second Trump-Kim summit can break this deadlock but policymakers must consider some innovative changes in our approach going forward, as well as focus on the most important variable for change in North Korea – the proliferation of markets.

Secondly, despite President Donald Trump's impulsive decision to meet the North Korean leader and seek reconciliation, the United States still pursues the complete and irreversible abandonment of all nuclear weapons, missiles, and WMD programs from the country. In a nod to diplomacy, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has stopped using the term "CVID" (complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement) which was coined by John Bolton during the George W. Bush administration and which the North Koreans hate. It was replaced with the term "final and fully

verifiable” denuclearisation but there has been no change in US goals to permanently rid this threat to homeland security.

The third constant in the diplomacy that has not changed is the problem of “sequencing.” The impasse in negotiations after the Singapore Summit is one familiar to anyone who has been close to these discussions about denuclearisation and peace treaty in the past. As the visit by ROK special envoys to North Korea in early September 2018 made clear, the North Korean complaint is that it wants the United States to sign up to a peace declaration ending the state of hostilities on the Peninsula before it is ready to consider any steps toward denuclearisation. Pyongyang points to its testing freeze, and decommissioning of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and the missile engine testing site as evidence of its intention to denuclearise. The United States, on the other hand, is unwilling to take such a step unless North Korea commits to denuclearisation in the form of: 1) commitment to a full declaration; 2) commitment to outside verification of the declaration and a denuclearisation process; and 3) commitment to a timeline. Washington does not trust the initial steps taken by North Korea and wants outside verification by international inspectors. In short, each side wants the other to go first.

The fourth constant relates to China. As in the past, China’s commerce with North Korea continues to undermine the US ability to put economic pressure on the regime as punishment for its WMD proliferation behaviour. Today, North Korea still remains the only country to have withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime and produced nuclear weapons. The UN has levied ten UN Security Council Resolutions on North Korea for this activity. However, since ninety percent of North Korea’s external trade is with one country, China, any costs for this rogue behaviour are muted because China continues to supply the regime with hard currency through trade and the import of North Korean mineral resources.

The fifth constant relates to human rights. As in the past, the summits have privileged the nuclear negotiations above all else, including the human rights abuses inside the country, despite UN resolutions and the UN Commission of Inquiry Report condemning the regime for its gulags, control of information, and other human rights violations. The United States has been consistently incapable of walking and chewing gum at the same time – that is, integrating a demand for the respect of human dignity consistent with the UN Charter as a tangible metric of the North Korean government’s commitment to reform and good standing in the community of nations.

There are no clear answers regarding the path forward. But there are two variables for change that are worth noting. The first relates to the negotiation and the second relates to North Korean society. The United States would do well to unhinge itself from the “sequencing” problem in the negotiations today. The current algorithm is not beneficial to US interests. The North and South Koreans are moving in the direction of some form of peace declaration. It is likely that China would support this as well. The United States, because of its position on denuclearisation, is not only left isolated but also could be perceived as the only opponent to peaceful reconciliation between the two Koreas on the Peninsula. Though I do not believe the US is an obstacle to peace on the Peninsula, the current negotiations could lead in this direction.

For this reason, it makes more sense to break the current impasse by delinking denuclearisation demands (1. Declaration; 2. Verification; 3. Timeline) from the peace declaration. Instead, the US and South Korea should require tangible conventional military tension reduction measures by North Korea in return for a peace declaration. At the top of this list should be the pull back of North Korean artillery from the border that ranges Seoul. Drawback of the North Korean threat to 25 million people within range of artillery would be tangible evidence that “peace” is

afoot. It is reversible for North Korea and of strategic value to the US and ROK, i.e., there would be time to react if the North started to move the artillery pieces within range in a conflict.

The United States would not be giving up on denuclearisation, but would deal with this on a separate track where the quid pro quo for denuclearisation steps by North Korea would not be peace treaties or political normalisation, but would be sanctions lifting. Peace declaration in return for conventional threat reduction and denuclearisation in return for sanctions relief is a “cleaner” algorithm that is consistent with this negotiation’s first principles.

Finally, the most important variable for change is occurring within North Korean society. A recent CSIS project reveals that there are at least 436 official markets sprouting up around the country, and that the vast majority of North Korean citizens gain more of their daily livelihood from the markets than they

do from the government ration system. According to our geolocating of these markets, the average North Korean has access to more than one market within one day’s transport from every major city in the country. Moreover, the government reaps substantial tax revenues from the operation of these markets making it unlikely that they will be shut down. Whenever you have market growth, even in a closed polity, you have the opportunity for the emergence of a civil society.

The market is the most important variable for change inside of the country. In contrast to the now-famous evening satellite image of a blackened North Korea juxtaposed with a luminous Asia, our markets map shows a plethora of market activity spreading like a heat rash across the country. For diplomats, therefore, the task is to find the sweet spot between denuclearisation, peace, and the promotion of market activity and human rights in the country. Admittedly, this is easier said than done.

### About the author



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