

Moon's Quest for Permanent Peace

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The goal of inter-Korean reconciliation and eventual peace is within reach. But the process to get there will take time. One year after Chairman Kim Jong-un used his New Year message to implicitly accept President Moon Jae-in's engagement offer, inter-Korean relations are in a much better place. Three summits between President Moon and Chairman Kim, military confidence-building measures and increasing aid to the North underscore the improvement in inter-Korean relations. But the Moon government wants to achieve what it calls 'permanent' or 'irreversible' peace. This means a state of affairs in which positive and holistic inter-Korean relations are not challenged by short-term politics and North Korea does not engage in provocative behaviour. Only then will reconciliation have been achieved and can potential reunification be seriously discussed.

Permanent peace will take time. This is why President Moon is focusing on creating the conditions for the ongoing inter-Korean diplomatic process to continue beyond his five-year term. The Blue House is well aware that ending over six decades of inter-Korean hostility will take years. Furthermore, President Moon believes that permanent peace cannot be achieved without an end to hostile US-North Korea relations. Thus, he emphasises the need for Washington and Pyongyang to develop a denuclearisation roadmap involving reciprocal steps if and as North Korea takes steps in that direction. The Blue House maintains, at least publicly, that Pyongyang is willing to denuclearise.

The focus on permanent peace includes the government taking steps to help create the necessary conditions

The goal of inter-Korean reconciliation and eventual peace is within reach. But the process to get there will take time. President Moon Jae-in understands that the road to end over sixty years of inter-Korean hostility and achieve 'permanent' peace is a long one. This is why his focus is on creating the conditions for inter-Korean diplomacy to continue beyond his five-year term in office. The military and economic engagement measures that Seoul has put in place, as well as those that the Moon government hopes to launch, are meant to create the conditions for the next South Korean president to have no option but to continue them. Furthermore, President Moon hopes that his quest for eventual peace will make the US accept diplomacy as the de facto option for its North Korea policy. For his government believes that ending US-North Korea hostility is a prerequisite to permanent peace.

while President Moon is in power. These involve, above all, upgrading military and economic relations beyond what has been achieved in the past. When it comes to military relations, the Moon government will continue to focus on concrete confidence-building measures similar to those included in April's Panmunjom Declaration and, especially, September's military agreement signed in Pyongyang. Among others, they include removing land mines and guard posts from the DMZ, as well as recovering soldier remains. Reducing

military tensions has the support of a majority of South Koreans, giving the Blue House the necessary political capital to continue its efforts.

In the area of inter-Korean economic relations, President Moon seeks to reopen joint economic projects, most notably the Kaesong Industrial Region, and to establish new ones. The Blue House is especially keen on developing an East Asian Railroad Community. This would connect South Korea with China and Russia through railways along the Western and Eastern coasts of North Korea. The idea is that Pyongyang will lose any incentive for military provocations when its economy is connected to both South Korea and the rest of Northeast Asia.

The Moon government is aware that sanctions are the main impediment to these and other economic projects. This explains President Moon's insistence on the US and North Korea establishing a roadmap including gradual removal of sanctions in exchange for Pyongyang taking steps towards denuclearisation. In the meantime, Seoul will continue to ask for waivers, such as the one it received to test the state of North Korea's railway tracks in late 2018. The Moon government will also continue to test what falls within the sanctions regime and what does not, as it did when it opened the Kaesong liaison office last September. In addition, Seoul will increase aid to North Korea, as earmarked in the budget for this year and as shown by the announcement of the provision of 200,000 doses of antiviral medication.

President Moon's hope is that the next South Korean president will encounter a situation in which going back on military and economic engagement does not make sense, regardless of whether he or she is a liberal or a conservative. Polls show that a large majority of South Koreans consistently express support for his North Korea policy, including up to half of self-described conservatives, underpinning his hope. The Blue House is well aware that one of the mistakes of the last liberal president, the late Roh Moo-hyun,

is that he pushed for inter-Korean engagement too late in his five-year term. There was neither time to implement the agreement that he reached in 2007 nor any real prospect of conservatives providing him with support.

To further make the current diplomatic process irreversible, President Moon regularly reiterates that he sees better inter-Korean relations as a means to boost the South Korean economy. Broadly speaking, it would allow South Korean firms to tap cheaper North Korean labour, provide investment and job opportunities for South Korean firms and workers helping to modernise North Korea's economy, and give South Korea's export-led economy land access to Eurasia all the way to Western European markets. The Blue House sees the opening up of North Korea as a growth engine for the South Korean economy, which runs counter to the long-held belief that inter-Korean reconciliation would be an unaffordable burden on South Korean taxpayers.

Seoul's strategy is predicated on the belief that Pyongyang also wants permanent peace. In private, Blue House officials who have met Chairman Kim and his closest advisors have expressed their belief that North Korea has indeed taken the decision to prioritise economic development and, crucially, to take serious steps towards denuclearisation. Certainly, any North Korean nuclear test and almost any kind of missile test would put an end to the current diplomatic process taking place in the Korean Peninsula. This explains why Seoul wants to maintain inter-Korean engagement regardless of the state of US-North Korea relations.

The Moon government also understands that the relationship between Washington and Pyongyang could deteriorate if the planned second summit between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim does not go well. Similarly, a future US president could decide to put an end to US-North Korea diplomacy or become more demanding on North Korea. This is the

reason why Seoul will have to continue consulting with Washington and why President Moon will continue to meet with President Trump as often as possible. But it should be noted that improving inter-Korean relations limits Washington's options in dealing

with Pyongyang. In a sense, President Moon's quest for permanent peace in the Korean Peninsula helps to put both Koreas in the driving seat of developments in the Korean Peninsula. This is the place where Seoul wants to be.

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