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Pre-Summit Posturing: The Trump-Kim Manoeuvres

By Alan Chong and Graham Ong-Webb

Synopsis

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Commentary

DIPLOMACY IS seldom divorced from political strategy. The on-off, on-again tempo of the dance between Chairman Kim Jong-Un of North Korea and President Donald Trump of the United States can easily invite cynicism towards peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula. But it can also serve as a classic lesson in diplomatic strategy.

Developments are not necessarily going south. They are all part of a bargaining game. Looking over the statements made by both sides since early April, North Korea has made significant concessions in terms of not seeking to negotiate for the withdrawal of the 28,000-strong US forces from South Korea. Kim also did not oppose the US-South Korean bilateral exercises codenamed FOAL EAGLE and KEY RESOLVE except to request that they be held after the Winter Olympics. The US acceded to North Korea. However, the timing of the Trump administration's decision to renege on the Iran nuclear deal sent a negative signal to Pyongyang.

Kim-Trump 'Game of Chicken'?

Subsequently, it appeared that Trump was compelling Kim to meet in Singapore given the unilateral nature of Trump's tweet on 10 May 2018 announcing Singapore as the venue without a simultaneous announcement from Kim. There is much speculation that Kim would have preferred Panmunjom or Mongolia instead. Kim would therefore

be expected to push back since he appeared momentarily to be dictated by a series of American *fait accomplis*.

This Kim-Trump ‘game of chicken’ is a necessary prelude to the proposed Singapore Summit – if it eventually materialises. This is the very same game that boxers join in the run-up to the actual bout. We see strategic communication in play. The Trump-Kim Singapore Summit has commenced on a virtual plane! There are three reasons why this is so.

Summit of the Ultranationalists

It must not be forgotten that both leaders have attained and consolidated political authority on the basis of ultranationalism. Kim Jong-un inherited the system of one man, one party rule from his father and grandfather. This system operated against the backdrop of a siege mentality derived from the fact that the Korean War of 1950-3 had not officially ended with a peace treaty.

Moreover, its bitter enemy South Korea remained allied to the US and agreed to the stationing of US troops south of the demilitarised zone at the 38th Parallel. Kim Jong-un also inherited the doctrine of Songgun that emphasised ‘military first’ policies that responded to the standing threat posed by an undefeated capitalist, pro-western South.

Consequently, Kim’s grandfather invoked the *Byungjin Nosun* (‘economic-nuclear parallel development policy’) doctrine to explain the positive correlation between the pursuit of nuclear weapons and military confrontation with Seoul with economic improvement. For an outsider, this does not make complete sense, but for North Korean citizens, the revival of these doctrines under Kim Jong-Un the grandson marked continued legitimacy under an autocratic regime.

Mirror Image of Trump’s ‘America First’ Doctrine?

President Trump’s enunciation of an ‘America First’ doctrine in January 2017 presented the perfect mirror image of Kim Jong-Un’s domestic propaganda. Trump’s worldview was mapped directly onto his foreign and economic policies in his first year in office. Trump vowed to fix North Korea as if it were a business snag.

This played right into Kim Jong-Un’s hands during episodes such as Trump’s infamous war of words in 2017 against Kim. Trump publicly labelled Kim ‘Little Rocket Man’ and threatened to respond to Pyongyang’s military provocation with ‘fire and fury’.

This was after Kim continued nuclear testing, placed the North Korean military on high alert and threatened to devastate the US base in Guam with nuclear weapons. Trump escalated matters earlier with the despatch of a carrier battle group into waters near North Korea, and operating B52 nuclear-armed bomber patrols on the edge of North Korean airspace.

Meanwhile, North Korea’s invisible cyber army continues to spite Washington and Seoul with an assortment of denial of service attacks and thefts of corporate data.

Instagram Denuclearisation?

Given the ratcheting up of personal animosities and parochial nationalisms, both leaders can in all probability forge a comprehensive peace agreement by daring to cross what might be billed as the most risky political bridge: a face-to-face summit. As is well known, summity can either work wonders by enhancing key leaders' predispositions towards friendliness or accentuating their antagonisms.

One can easily imagine the worst clashes of egos and rhetorics between Kim and Trump if they were to ever meet in person. But we have already witnessed the worst vitriol in public – through the media of press, satellite television and Twitter.

The letters and conciliatory comments made first by Kim in mid-May, after he threatened to call off the summit because of US-South Korean 'provocations' through military exercises and then by Trump on 23 May, citing unremitting hostility from North Korea, makes for a highly positive political dividend should both leaders actually meet. The world's media would then naturally be abuzz with glowing headlines.

If we were to read Trump and Kim correctly, their personalistic leadership styles can only benefit from a repeated game of chicken. Both need to engage in truth or dare in order to secure their legitimacy and their nationalist credentials.

And if past summits from the Congress of Vienna in 1815, to Nixon and Mao in Beijing in 1972, are any guide, both Trump and Kim want to spar quite a few rounds before settling down at the table to justify earnestly why they need each other's agreement to give the other the grand bargain he wants.

For the age of the iPhone Camera, Twitter and Instagram, an exchange of denuclearisation for economic normalisation could well be worth political gold at home.

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