



The Upcoming Kim-Trump Summit in Vietnam

Why the Korea Nuclear Crisis will not get fixed with Conformist Means

Morgane FARGHEN | Founder and Director of the Asia Nuclear Initiative (<http://asia-nuclear-initiative.org/>), Thomas More Institute.

As the next summit between Trump and Kim is in its final stage of preparations, speculations are running about the prospects of its upcoming results. For a few months, rumors have also spread concerning a redefinition of negotiation objectives aiming at reaching an all-in-one deal.

Whatever the outcome, one thing remains certain: the North Korea nuclear crisis will not be solved with the implementation of conformist policy, being merely a copy of usual and already existing multilateral agreements. Looking at the parties involved make this very clear: A dictatorial regime in Pyongyang, a 70 years old Single Communist Party in China, and a non-conformist American President are all but likely to succeed their talks if they conform to previous inefficient denuclearization schemes. Approaches reminiscent of 19th Century style Open Door Policies and good economic relations seem to have remained the norms and standards in European capitals until now. Unfortunately, neither North Korea nor China fit these now outdated and irrelevant ways of dealing with major powers. The realities of international relations in this second decade of the XXI century are tougher and rooted in deep Bismarckian realism. Global competitors have become more challenging and requirements to reach a deal are proportionally higher.

The prospect of a regional arms control to replace a series of bilateral agreements could bring the hope of new options and leverages, involving more governments in the settlement. This is susceptible to certainly fit multilateralist standards and therefore please the political opposition in D.C., as it set high the issue of arms control on its nuclear agenda, should it have won the 2016 Presidential elections. Nevertheless reaching a solid deal in such a context requires mutual trust in the sincerity of the denuclearization efforts of the other party. This is also reinforced with a stable negotiation environment. Currently, all of this is dearly lacking. The new US Administration has therefore shown unprecedented determination to address China in a more demanding way and shows itself



unexpectedly creative in reshaping the landscape to influence negotiations. Such a projected framework probably remains idealistic, unrealistic and premature. As a result, the summit will probably rather be a major milestone than the final destination of the North Korea crisis settlement.

Since a new channel of dialogue opened, challengers to a settlement have exploited to the utmost a poly crisis environment itself an intrinsic part of the global disorder. They have taken advantage of unprecedented political conflicts in the West erupting during the same period to better defend their own national interests. All of this was undertaken at the expense of the denuclearization process. North Korea has only vaguely committed it-self to denuclearize. The process remains fragile and versatile. Moreover, conditions for verification have yet to be agreed upon and implemented. Since the renewal of the nuclear proliferation dialogue in the Peninsula, North Korea has kept on trying to delay and postpone the conclusion of a denuclearization mechanism, all while attempting to frame and maintain a margin of maneuver to raise the cost of a potential deal and eventually come back to the normal. According to its own standards, the new normal is about diplomatic turn about, nuclear missile tests, coupled with verbal provocations and an increasingly confrontational stance. The strategic landscape is still confusing. As a matter of fact, confidence in the West collapsed and China, the one stakeholder capable of influencing North Korea, has evolved from provocative expansionist free rider to an inhibited contesteer of the rules-based order in the quest for global leadership.

The potential for reaching a deal lays in a much broader and sophisticated approach than observers usually depict when it comes to the current American foreign policy or the crisis management in itself. The equation about how to deal with the North Korea nuclear crisis at a time of renewed imperialism and strategic competition for global leadership has resulted in a mix of classic and original tools that make the process intrinsically creative and bold. The North Korea nuclear crisis is a top priority in D.C.: the aim is to reach a solid deal, and the upcoming summit in Vietnam is key to staging the expected progress in that regard. The « carrot and stick policy » has been a typical formula of conservative strategic circles in Washington to address critical nuclear proliferation cases. It mixes incentives and coercive diplomacy. As sanctions were implemented, Washington was reshaping the strategic landscape according to its own « American First » agenda and with its own strategic toolbox. In exchange for a complete, irreversible and verifiable denuclearization, the North Korean regime is offered a diplomatic normalization and a mix of investments coupled with a set of selected transfers aimed at lifting its economy from misery and archaism. The administration in Washington does not pursue a regime change, but rather its transformation. After years of heavy-handed coercive diplomacy, North Korea is given a chance to emancipate, provided that security guarantees will be provided to support both an agreement and the America First agenda. Except for the security team itself, no one



knows how far this administration is ready to go on that aspect. For sure, North Korea won't abandon its nuclear capabilities for anything and it is in its interest to raise the cost to the utmost. It is in the interest of China too. The conciliating South Korean president doesn't seem to be willing to oppose so much resistance as long as the reconciliation remains a tangible outcome. Finally, if progress is made in the denuclearization process, a lifting of sanctions may come sooner than expected.

With an assertive China, and with an American president considering that there is no taboo, coercive diplomacy has taken the form of tariffs. For the first time, an American president dares to address the North Korea crisis through the China lens and in convergence with a definitely an innovative agenda, distanced from previous conformist solutions. Liberal circles have considered trade wars perspective both with condemnation and dread. Tariffs target the core sensitive nerve of China's economic development model and trajectory. By leveraging tariffs, this administration has broken up a 30 years old consensus that has made of « good » economic relations with China, which were in effect asymmetric, a liberal dogma and diktat. A diktat that China has wisely used to shape the game, without experiencing any serious resistance ahead. The former president has raised the voice to ask China to be more cooperative but not to the extent that it would leverage an asymmetric and unbalanced trade relation.

Nuclear developments in North Korea Nuclear policy and capabilities are alarming. They are as much the results of an uncompromising North Korea as much as unforgivable Western *laissez-faire* toward China. As a Permanent Member of the Security Council, a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, China should support the denuclearization process in a much more effective way. Before Donald Trump, no US President had ever taken this question seriously. After fifteen years of proliferation, the North Korea nuclear program is more than just a means to maintain the regime alive. It has become a means to challenge the established nuclear distribution and to dispute the rules-based order. In that regard, it is one of its main pillars, the regime of nonproliferation. The fascination for the Chinese market and the promise of great deals, has long seduced the Europeans and the seduction is still operating. But the European *laissez-faire* has had a heavy cost. Current turbulences talk for themselves. They are nothing compared to a renewed nuclear paradigm under Chinese conditions.

Dealing with a North Korea nuclear crisis requires both being old and bold and the summit in Vietnam will be a major milestone in the process. It will open a new strategic sequence, as much as it also closes up a difficult one, not only for North Korea and China but also for liberal democracies. The whole liberal axis from Ottawa to Seoul via Paris and Brussels has been subjected by the US to the same treatment as China, for having endorsed unquestioningly its security narrative. Double standard-policies do not fit the security landscape either. North Korea's prevarications to postpone the deadline of a complete, irreversible and verifiable denuclearization, has entailed tariffs that resulted in economic tensions. The



opening of a new dialogue on the Peninsula has repelled the risks of an escalation but only momentarily. From the military realm, tensions have for now at least ver-
sed into the economic realm.

Paris and Brussels certainly wish they could eat the cake and have it, which is going to be a very hard bet considering its inherent contradictions: they have promoted a liberal agenda defined upon Climate change, while they also were lob-
bying China for hefty contracts and fighting against North Korea proliferation. Moreover, they have striven to show-case an iron alliance with the United States, all while falling prey to China's rosy narrative about peace. Such inconsistencies were to be found similarly in the Iranian nuclear proliferation context with similar negative results for the EU's diplomatic efforts (reference...). Such inconsis-
tencies show that strategic interdependence never has been so challenging over the past few decades. It is also a sign that the double standard policy is not working anymore, Paris and Brussels have been cracked by Washington, all while being offended by the Chinese North Korean opposite side. The European Commission has been outraged and humiliated by Chinese cyber attacks.

How to address China is the centerpiece of the Peninsula's strategic puzzle. It has become the cornerstone the transatlantic relation. The North Korea nuclear issue has become a Chinese issue and because it has become a Chinese issue, it has become a defining variable of conflictual transatlantic relations. The Europeans seem to be willing against all odds to remain stubbornly conformist, while Washington expects them to be bolder. If the denuclearization process gets stalled, Washington will re-impose tariffs and the trade war will start again with more impacting consequences. On the eve of this summit, the Europeans face an impor-
tant dilemma. They have to finally make a clear choice as to which side of the negotiating table they prefer to sit at in the redefined global order: either on the side of non-proliferation supporting states that protect Western liberal or, oppo-
sing them, and running again the risks of self contradiction without immunity against potential cyber attacks from the opposite side ♦

Courriel de l'auteure : morgane.farghen@cea.fr