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A Report From Ground Zero On The Korean Peninsula

by



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When the ICWA delegation for a dialogue with Korean National Diplomatic Academy(KNDA) landed at Incheon airport on the morning of 27 May, it was greeted with the surprising news of a summit on the previous day between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong-un. The event was the latest in the ongoing series of un-precedented summits, meetings, statements and tantrums in which the four main protagonists of the continuing saga on the Korean peninsula have been engaged.

For the delegation led by Director General Ambassador Nalin Surie, the dates of the dialogue had been determined in the light of an expected Presidential visit from South Korea. But developments on the Korean peninsula were prominent in all the formal and informal discussions with KNDA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, three think tanks and both conservative and liberal strategic experts.

Whether and when the summit between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un would take place, only future can tell. But candid discussions with South Korean officials and pundits revealed a tectonic shift in the perceptions of South Korea towards the North and major re-adjustment in the South Korean strategic orientation towards the United States and China.

The South Korean polity is broadly divided between two ideologies ever since the big power enforced division of the country in 1945. Conservatives are closer to US, distrustful of China and follow a policy of reconciliation with North Korea based on strict reciprocity. Liberals, represented by President Moon Jae-in, have been wary of US, respectful of China and willing to go more than half way in reconciling with North Korea. In the ongoing internal discourse about the unfolding détente between North and South Korea, the conservatives raise the issue whether Kim Jong-un can be trusted, given DPRK's past record. The liberal answer is that trust is now being built through negotiations and one should not be a prisoner of the past.

Conservatives are skeptical about the North ever giving up its nuclear weapons and ICBM capacity. Liberal belief is that the cost to North Korea in foregoing the nuclear option is small as compared to the promised benefits including economic development, recognition as an equal and peace treaty.

On the motives behind Kim Jong-un's quest for peace, opinion in South Korea is uncertain. There is general consensus, however, that the severity of sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in April 2017 and President Trump's relentless pressure on China to fully implement these sanctions has had a

major and un-sustainable adverse impact on the North Korean economy. According to Prof. Lee Song-sook of the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security there has been a gradual change in the North Korean polity since the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party in May 2016 which had formalized Kim Jong-un's succession. Subsequently in June 2016 the Supreme Peoples' Assembly revised the constitution to create a 'State Affairs Commission' (SAC) with Kim Jong-un as the Chairman. This is the title by which the North Korean leader is now identified by the North Korean media and the world. The Commission has replaced the 'National Defense Commission' which had ruled over North Korea earlier headed by the late Kim Jong-il. The SAC has reportedly dropped the 'Songun' (military first) doctrine indicating the 'Songun politics' is no longer North Korea's ruling ideology. These steps have led to a fundamental change in the relations between North Korea's Party, military and the government which was further consolidated at the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th Central Committee on 20 April 2018.

At the 20 April Plenum Kim Jong-un declared North Korea's new strategic aim of 'socialist economic construction' and announced that North Korea would make efforts to create an international environment favorable for economic reconstruction including 'close contact and active dialogue with neighboring countries and the international community'. This analysis explains the recent changes in North Korea's strategic objectives and the direction of its foreign policy and bodes well for a peaceful and less volatile North Korea.

President Moon has apparently been able to convince Chairman Kim of the sincerity of South Korea's offer of economic reconstruction and regime stability of North Korea and both the leaders have a remarkable degree of understanding and trust as revealed by their second summit on 26 May. The challenge for President Moon is to adjust to the 'new style of diplomacy' conducted by President Trump. A significant shift in the public mood in South Korea has been among the youth who were earlier indifferent to any talk of reunification or reconciliation with their Northern kins. Recent polls have revealed a heightened and positive interest and support among the youth for the recent thaw between the North and the South. President Moon's approval ratings have been consistently around 70 % thus greatly strengthening his hand.

South Korean media and experts share the opinion that China is deeply unhappy at its marginalization in the ongoing peace & reconciliation process on the Korean peninsula. In his two summits with Chairman Kim on 26 March and 7 May, President Xi Jin-ping has bluntly stated China's own

interests and centrality in any future agreements on the Korean peninsula both as a major participant in the Korean War and subsequent guarantor of North Korean security.

South Korean policy makers are alarmed that the Chinese companies are gradually replacing Korean products both in the Chinese and international market.

South Korean scholars are debating whether, going forward, to broaden networking with China or deepen relationship with US and Japan as the inevitability of the Chinese economy overtaking the US economy in the decade of the 2030s is being factored in. The scope, durability and extent of US rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific initiated by President Barak Obama and its continuation by the Trump administration is also being continuously assessed. However, the South Koreans believe that China must be included in any future Asian strategic architecture. They believe that after the 19th Party Congress China has embarked on a 'powerful country strategy' and is determined to increasingly shape the international order in Asia. However, China is still in a militarily weaker position vis-à-vis US and it is not the right time for them to directly challenge the US. But the Chinese are confident of the gradual decline of the United States and in the inevitability of China overtaking US first in economic and later in military capacity. The South Korean strategic analysts are pondering over the ways to deal with the rapidly changing strategic equations and are considering the feasibility of a 'coalition of middle powers'.

In this background, the present reality is that there is a greater degree of strategic understanding, communication and convergence of objectives between President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim Joong-un than between President Moon and President Trump on the one hand and Chairman Kim and President Xi on the other. The two Koreas are likely to doggedly pursue the Panmunjom Declaration of 27 April but their diplomatic skills will be tested to the limits by an unpredictable Trump and a suspicious China.
