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Korean Rapprochement: Analysing The Third North-South Summit

By Liang Tuang Nah

Synopsis

Analysis of the third North-South Korea summit reveals that Kim Jong-un has given up little while receiving much. The US and South Korea would be well advised to be firm and cautious in their dealings with Pyongyang to avoid being exploited.

Commentary

THE RECENTLY concluded summit in Pyongyang between President Moon Jae-in of South Korea (ROK) and Chairman Kim Jong-un of North Korea (DPRK) seems to have thrown up a winner, and it is not the South Korean leader.

The outcome of the talks on 18-20 September 2018 was marked by easily reversible agreements based on the sentimentality of Korean reconciliation, and insubstantial concessions that hardly promote nuclear disarmament. The Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 showed that the Kim regime has emerged as the clear beneficiary of this third inter-Korean summit.

The Pyongyang Joint Declaration: Four Steps

Essentially, the Pyongyang Joint Declaration commits both the ROK and DPRK to undertake four key steps. The first is to implement military de-escalation measures across their shared border. The second is to further economic, infrastructural and social cooperation, including transportation link building, joint economic zone development and epidemic prevention initiatives.

The third is to implement permanent measures to reunite families separated by the 1950-53 Korean War. The fourth is to further cultural, social and sporting exchanges. But most importantly, the fifth is that the Korean peninsula must be denuclearised.

Regarding this last point, Kim pledged to permanently decommission the Dongchang-ri missile engine test site and launch platform with a possible option to dismantle nuclear facilities at Yeongbyeon, if the US reciprocates with appropriate concessions.

Implications of Joint Declaration

There are three positive but reversible components of the declaration. Firstly, the Kim regime expressed support for reunions between separated families from the North and South. This would be well received in the ROK and improve the popularity of the Moon administration, since Moon managed to negotiate such a concession.

Similarly, pro-reunification voters would rejoice over cultural and social exchanges with their northern brethren, along with unified Korean representation at next Olympics. Lastly, security stability along the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) and in Southern provinces closer to North Korea would be welcomed across all sectors of South Korean society.

But inasmuch as all this would provide positive optics for the summit and boost Moon's political standing, it benefits the Kim regime more; yet it could be easily undone by executive order from Pyongyang, if Kim's attempts at international diplomacy ever turn sour.

It should be noted that there is minimal cost to Pyongyang in agreeing to more family reunions, civil exchanges or joint sporting participation. Any northern financing shortfalls for these feel-good events would more than likely be covered by Seoul or South Korea corporations eager to do their bit to smoothen the road to reunification.

Curtailling Military Antagonism?

As for curtailing military antagonism, there might be reputational benefits to Kim. The world is so used to seeing a bellicose North Korea that *any* improvements to stability in the Korean peninsula would be quietly celebrated, amid hopes that Kim is actually a secret reformist.

Holistically, all these initiatives help to rehabilitate the DPRK's image and alleviate the isolation imposed on it as a result of its illegal nuclear and missile programmes, all without ever giving up a single warhead or missile.

Next, South Korea would benefit from economic cooperation with the North given Pyongyang's educated workforce, cheap wages and significant natural resources. But the ROK's developed economy can find partners anywhere around the globe, whereas an international pariah like the DPRK can only look to China as an industrial patron.

Moreover, the North's impoverished finances would mean that the South would end up funding the lion's share of any capital expenses for all joint projects. Hence, if international sanctions against North Korea are ever lifted, Seoul would be bankrolling Pyongyang's economic rehabilitation.

No Concrete Denuclearisation

Be that as it may, the third Moon-Kim summit does not hold the Kim regime to any concrete nuclear disarmament. The dismantling of the Dongchang-ri missile test site is purely symbolic and will still leave Pyongyang free to build another test site. It may even test fire a missile from a mobile Transporter Erector Launcher (TEL), which is a vehicle which can carry a missile to new locations and prepare the aforementioned missile for launch in short order.

Even if the US subsequently makes a valuable concession to the DPRK and the latter demolishes its nuclear materials manufacturing facilities at Yeongbyeon, that would still leave North Korea in possession of an unknown number of nuclear warheads and the capability to manufacture missiles to deliver these warheads to targets in South Korea, Japan, Guam and even the continental United States.

Therefore, all “concessions” thus far allow the preservation of Kim’s nuclear arsenal and concurrently give the impression that he has made denuclearisation progress, providing pretext for China and Russia to unofficially ease sanctions on the DPRK.

Kim: Not To Be Underestimated

Kim Jong-un is a capable negotiator who plans to have his proverbial cake and eat it too. His *Byungjin* ideology of nuclear arms retention *and* economic prosperity may fly in the face of nuclear non-proliferation norms.

But he seems determined to achieve this while having Seoul subsidise his economy, while hoping to erode the US sanctions, and that President Trump will accept insubstantial denuclearisation measures. This should not be acceptable.

Although Kim can certainly be expected to exploit Moon’s dovish proclivities and promote his regime’s agenda, by accepting Moon’s invitation to visit Seoul for the 4th North-South summit this year, Washington does not have to stand idly by.

Indeed, the Trump administration should remain firm on the North’s nuclear disarmament by insisting on verifiable denuclearisation steps, such as an IAEA-verified accounting of warheads and plutonium and uranium stocks, *before* further requests for US-DPRK engagement is granted.

Secondly, the US should exert pressure at the United Nations Security Council and through bilateral diplomacy to reinforce or refresh sanctions enforcement. Thirdly, the US should be more resistant to Kim’s direct messaging towards Trump. Kim can say whatever he wants, but he needs to be reminded that talk is cheap and only nuclear arms relinquishment can bring about normalised Washington-Pyongyang relations.

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