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THE CONVERSATION

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A Korean peace process is underway – but it still depends on the US and China

April 27, 2018 4.49pm BST

EPA/Korea Summit Press Pool

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The meeting between North Korea's Kim Jong-un and South Korea's Moon Jae-in is certainly one of the most dramatic and momentous events in the recent history of East Asia. Beyond the symbolism of cross-border handshakes and tree planting (not to mention a controversially decorated mango mousse that briefly ticked off Japan), the joint declaration that a peace treaty will be agreed this year and that the two countries share a goal of denuclearisation marks the most important development in inter-Korean relations since the Armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953.

The first real opportunity for this dialogue seemed to come when South Korea hosted the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang in February this year. But in practice, it's unlikely that a conveniently located sporting event was the only catalyst for such a dramatic shift in North Korean foreign policy.

Among analysts of Korean affairs, a few theories are circulating. Some think that the Kim government made its overtures because it genuinely fears that economic sanctions could become an existential threat; others surmise that the regime's programme of weapons testing has now provided it with sufficient reassurance that it could deter a serious attack. A third theory suggests that Donald Trump's unpredictable approach to international relations gave the north a sense of urgency.

But whatever the precise stimulus or concatenation of circumstances, the north has turned out to be rather more diplomatically sophisticated than many observers thought. When Pyongyang first reached out to Seoul about the possibility of a meeting via its emissaries to the Winter Olympics, it was unclear how such a historic summit could be organised in such a short space of time. Such events

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Languages

- Bahasa Indonesia
- English

ordinarily take months of planning and negotiation over the finest of details, yet the two sides gave themselves just a matter of weeks in which to arrange it.

Kim Jong Un Crosses to South, Greet Moon



Kim Jong-un's visit to Beijing – his first overseas trip as North Korea's leader – proved to be pivotal. Kim left reassured of his most important ally's support, and he eased Beijing's growing fear of being sidelined in the process. This summit also provided the first example of Kim's previously unappreciated diplomatic skills as he played the role of junior partner perfectly with Xi Jinping.

Still, for all the outpouring of emotion on all sides, a dose of realism is in order.

The long game

Despite the declaration of Kim and Moon that the complete denuclearisation of the peninsula is the goal, it's not yet clear whether two sides take that phrase to mean the same thing. Whether or not Pyongyang is willing to accept a reduction in its capability of any level is unclear, but even if it engaged to the fullest extent in a denuclearisation deal, its weapons programme is ultimately irreversible: North Korea now knows how to produce these weapons, and it will still know how even if the ones it has are destroyed.

Another notable declaration at the summit was the two leaders' undertaking to "actively pursue" meetings either with the US or with the US and China. This nods to an uncomfortable truth: any discussion about inter-Korean relations can never be purely bilateral. As historic as this summit was, the issues at the core of Korea's division cannot be resolved without the direct involvement of the US and China.

China will not tolerate being marginalised by the US, and will do all it can to ensure that the next step is a four-way dialogue. Similarly, North Korea will need the support of its most significant economic partner if it is to rebuild its economy. Ultimately, China's interests are best served by peaceful coexist-

ence between the two Koreas rather than reunification, which would deprive it of a buffer state between its border and that of a US military ally. It is likely that Xi will continue to support Kim and provide assistance in economic development rather than encourage a formal dissolution of the border with the south.

Similarly, regardless of the wishes of those south of the border, concrete progress with the north cannot be achieved without the US's contribution. As things stand, the south needs Washington's security guarantees, and the north's various priorities all revolve around safeguarding itself against hypothetical US military action.

So, as momentous as the Kim-Moon meeting was, the two men alone do not hold the key to their countries' futures. But despite this stark geopolitical reality, it would be wrong not to acknowledge the magnitude of this tremendous step forward. That the two Koreas are talking again is progress in itself – and that it seems likely they will keep talking and building trust is the very best anyone could have hoped for from this unprecedented meeting.



Nuclear weapons North Korea South Korea US foreign policy East Asia Kim Jong-Un Chinese foreign policy



Moon Jae-in

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