

STATES OF MATTER

Korean show: Will they, won't they?

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Mood swings of both Pyongyang and Washington DC could change the script, but reconciliation on the Korean peninsula now seems within reach

The “madman” routine in foreign relations is one that could in certain circumstances, be deployed to great advantage. It involves a simulation of irrational and volatile behaviour, that induces so deep a sense of dread among adversarial states, that some form of appeasement becomes an acceptable course.

Since inheriting the mantle of leadership in North Korea, Kim Jong-Un has fed news reports about a deep streak of insanity, allegedly ordering the murder by toxic needle of a half-brother in Kuala Lumpur and executing dissident generals by placing them in the path of high-powered artillery. He also threw in a steady stream of insult and invective with the seeming assurance — especially since Donald Trump moved into the White House — of reciprocity from that quarter, heightening global concern over an absence of adult responsibility in high places.

Last December, just when the insults were flying at their most furious, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, spoke out rather strangely, proposing talks with North Korea. Pushback was almost instantaneous from the White House, which authorised a statement that there had been no change in official policy.

Tillerson's abrupt sacking mid-March may have been delayed punishment for stepping out of line on North Korea. His designated successor, Mike Pompeo, gained appointment as director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the record of his participation as a Congressman from the mid-west — where concern for the outer world is minimal — in intelligence oversight committees.

As a man who sees virtue in the unthinking exercise of power, Pompeo is expected to serve Trump's agenda better than the former petroleum industry grandee Tillerson. That image of a President moulding his foreign policy team in his own simplistic image, was reinforced when Trump sacked his national security adviser, the highly-regarded three-star general HR McMaster. Replacement John Bolton brought to the job the distinction of being blackballed by his party representatives when the last Republican president, George W Bush, nominated him as ambassador to the United Nations.

Bolton and Pompeo seemed the dream team for a President who thought it rather dumb for the US to scale back spending on nuclear weapons, where it outspends the rest of the world several times over. Bolton has set himself the immediate priority of tearing up a nuclear restraint agreement the US led a number of allies in negotiating with Iran during the Obama presidency. It was totally out of character for this team of hawks then, to initiate a pathway towards a negotiated end to the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula. Most breathtaking of course, was Pompeo's lead role in the process, as Trump's secret envoy to North Korea over Easter.

Once the sense of novelty was dispelled, what lay revealed was a pathway strewn with obstacles. "Denuclearisation" is the presumed objective, but that is a word which carries different meanings with every one of the principals. For the US, it means a verifiable end of the North Korean nuclear weapons programme, the dismantling of existing explosive devices and their delivery systems and the phased elimination of its fissile material stockpile. For North Korea, it means the elimination of existential threats that originate across a wide theatre, including in US conventional forces stationed in South Korea and Okinawa, and nuclear fleets that sail in the near vicinity.

For the US the question is the broader one of safeguarding its pre-eminence in the region and denying strategic room to potential adversaries such as China. Needless to say, China has never been at ease with this wider definition of strategic objects and tilts strongly towards the North Korean perception in seeking US reciprocity in any denuclearisation agreement. Since the first stirrings in the early-'90s, the threat of a North Korean nuclear breakout has attracted several diplomatic initiatives, with each successive iteration involving a reduced US role.

In 1994, the Clinton administration concluded a negotiation begun under its predecessor, with an "Agreed Framework" that involved North Korean disarmament in return for assistance in securing fuel oil and nuclear reactors. By 2002, that deal had unravelled amid disagreements over the scheduling of deliveries

from the US side and the inspection of North Korean nuclear facilities to ensure compliance. It finally collapsed when the Bush administration, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, rather implausibly enfolded North Korea with Iran and Iraq, into its theological construct of an “axis of evil”.

North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003 and tested its first nuclear explosive device in 2006. The burden of enforcing nuclear restraint has since been taken over by China, which has held a series of talks involving three countries other than itself and the two Koreas: the US., Japan and Russia. With the removal of one president by impeachment last year and the election of another who is strongly inclined towards peace, South Korea has signalled that it favours conciliation. This week's summit of the Koreas is an opportunity for the two estranged neighbours to figure out a way of turning the page on their embittered past.



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